

Spring 2003

# THE MIND'S EYE

A Liberal Arts Journal  
Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts



## **On Revision**

By Karen Pepper

**Manuel Puig, Pedro Almodóvar and the Politics of Camp**  
By Graziana Ramsden

**Narrative of Surprising Conversations:  
Irv in New York**  
By Thomas Weston Fels

**Race Relations as End Game**  
Book Review by Meera Tamaya

**A Brainy Pole Among Dim Aristos**  
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*The Mind's Eye*, a journal of scholarly and creative work, is published twice annually by Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts. While emphasizing articles of scholarly merit, *The Mind's Eye* focuses on a general communication of ideas of interest to a liberal arts college. We welcome expository essays, including reviews, as well as fiction, poetry and art. Please refer to the inside back cover for a list of writer's guidelines.

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## *Editor's File*

When the country is embroiled in war overseas and fear and uncertainty stalk the land, when the governor of Massachusetts seeks to arbitrarily reconfigure public higher education in light of a budgetary nightmare, it is reassuring to contemplate the products of intellectual skill and achievement published in the pages of *The Mind's Eye*. This issue is no exception, with Graziana Ramsden's marvelous tapestry woven from the works of Manuel Puig and Pedro Almodóvar. Drawn from her Ph.D. dissertation, this account is presented here as an essay that does honor to the crafts of film and literary criticism. Tom Fels shares a portion of his longer memoir by taking us on a New York tour with several ex-communards from the early seventies. Fels confronts us with some bizarre juxtapositions and evolutions of character, as he pieces together past fragments of his life with present-day reality. Karen Pepper's "On Revision" is, indeed, a revision of her own teaching methods and a distillation of a variety of avenues to a more successful method of achieving good writing. Finally, Meera Tamaya charms and inspires with two reviews. Engaging the books under consideration, as well as the reader, she whisks us along to new places with her own enthusiasm for the texts.

This issue marks the sixth year of *The Mind's Eye* and will be my last full season as Managing Editor of the journal. The next academic year will, at some point, usher in a new force at the helm. I will remain on the Editorial Board to contribute as enthusiastically and in as many ways as I can. It has, indeed, been a pleasure to witness the birth and evolution of *The Mind's Eye*. I pay tribute to those who have appreciated and supported the journal in so many ways over the years; for, ultimately, readers and contributors keep *The Mind's Eye* operating, as do the members of our Editorial and Advisory Boards—members such as James MacGregor Burns, who recently commented: "[*The Mind's Eye*] has a combination of variety, depth and eclecticism that is most refreshing, and the whole appearance, layout and typography continue to be most attractive. The fact that MCLA can produce as finished and sophisticated a journal continues to be an enormous tribute to the faculty of the college and a wonderful representation of the college to the world outside."

Tony Gengarely, *Managing Editor*

# On Revision

BY KAREN PEPPER

*Note: An earlier version of this paper was delivered at the 18th Annual National Conference on Peer Tutoring in Writing.*

## Must We Revise?

If we start from the premise that students ought, at least occasionally, to revise their papers, then one of our tasks in teaching composition is to give them techniques with which to do so. The premise can certainly be called into question: Why revise anything that is not intended for publication? Revision does, in fact, begin with evaluating "cost"; for a particular piece of writing, is it worth the time and effort? This is a crucial evaluation, but it can wisely be made only if one has already encountered the monster; that is, if one has already had some experience with writing successive drafts. And what of those papers that seem yet to be born, the ones that, if left in the first draft stage, will certainly die in embryo—a mere scratching of the surface, hardly the full-blown development of a thesis? Revision is more than "doin' the comma shuffle"—it involves finding one's intellectual footing on unfamiliar, sometimes difficult, terrain. Suffice it to say, then, that techniques for revision—and most writers have them—are as essential to the student as an understanding of grammar; both are aspects of the craft.

Motivating students to revise their work, however, at least in my experience, is even more difficult than eliciting an interest in the subordinate clause. Their point, and it is well taken, is that they have already done the work. They will often try to bargain for the grade: "Couldn't you just grade the first draft, instead of making us do it again?" How can I teach them that they are not just doing the same thing twice? Perhaps there is a way to acknowledge both first and second drafts, rather than to give the first draft a grade that doesn't "count." Grading becomes even more problematic than usual.

Secretly, as a writer, I sympathize with my students' reluctance to revise. No sooner am I faced with a first draft of my own than my priorities undergo a magical rearrangement: Suddenly, the time has come to impose a strict policy of segregation on bath and hand towels, and I will proceed to waste the morning mindlessly sorting out the linen cabinet. In recent years, however, I have learned to value—and to trust—revision more. The ping-pong of thought and formulation that occurs as one revises is the central act of expository writing, and the more one bats the ball over the net, the better the writing usually becomes.

I used to begin by telling my students that for the duration of the term I would consider them writers. Lately, however, this statement has begun to ring false. Revision is so much the substance of writing, the actual work, that I wonder whether, in submitting one assignment after another without going back to revise the first in light of the third, students are doing the work of writing at all. Writers (generally) revise; students (generally) do not. While many students are willing to straighten an awkward sentence here or there, that is, to polish their writing, they are not inclined to crumple up an entire first draft or—less satisfying but equally effective—to click on "select all" and then on "delete." In part, the difference between what writers and students do may lie in the highly artificial time constraint of the semester. In part, however, it may be that in the classroom the question of how to revise has not been addressed directly.

The kind of revision that interests me—the kind I am trying to teach—is not the going over of an established text with a fine-tooth comb in search of errors that spell-check may have missed: It is not copy-editing. Revision of that kind displaces the emphasis in writing from where it should lie—close to the writer's central concerns—to a

series of essentially mechanical tasks. Correcting errors is certainly a useful thing for students to learn and to practice, but it is only a minor part of the process of revision.

Revision, according to Liam Rector, poet and director of the Bennington Writing Seminars, means re-envisioning (personal communication). Similarly, Donald Murray, in his book *The Craft of Revision*, writes, "Revision means to see again" (47). This sort of revision, I suspect, cannot be imposed from the outside. Unlike correcting, or polishing, a text, it cannot be done by an editor. I can correct my students' writing; I can let my spidery little comments extend down the margin, wrapping their prose in my own illustrative web, but this will have little effect on the quality of the papers I receive. A second draft is of no great value if it is merely a corrected version of the first. Nor if it is a pruned, reshaped or embellished version of the first. A good second draft is one that comes from the re-envisioning of the first draft from the ground up.

Certain criteria that are used for revision are fairly standard. The revised version should be cleaned up: It should be clearer and more concise than the previous version. It should be free of errors in spelling, punctuation, grammar and usage. The paper should have a structure; it should be organized according to a scheme that the reader can divine. The writer should have weighed his words, considered alternatives, made the necessary changes. Finally, the paper should add up to something substantial: It should elucidate an idea; it should argue or defend; it should teach.

I wonder, however, whether this is quite enough. There are other qualities that I seek when I read, although they are harder to name. These qualities do not fall into the categories of formal correctness or rhetorical strength. I am looking, I think, for a fullness, a generosity, as if the writer had poured into the words as much as they could hold, had filled them; or as if the writer had taken some risk, had been willing to come through a barrier of estrangement, extending himself toward the reader, leaning on the words, asking that they carry more weight than they do in speech. The image I have is one of hands sticking out of a wall. It is an image that is tinged with desperation, the desperation that comes from having something that has to be said and from knowing that no one else is quite able to say it.

And what of the process itself—does it have any intrinsic value beyond the quality of the product that it yields? Does the student stand to gain anything besides a more finely constructed piece of work? If revision somehow teaches us to think better, might we not use the notion of intrinsic gain to motivate both the learning and the teaching of revision?

Revision enables the writer to consider his ideas from more than one angle. Like a gemstone displayed in a jeweler's shop window, the first draft comes into view gradually, presenting each hewn and each unhehwn facet in turn. The reviser is now the reader, someone who sees the work from the outside yet understands something of its internal mechanism, or logic. The reviser is both mirror observer of himself as writer, and reader, subjective and objective by turns. The question to be asked is, What am I trying to convey in this piece of writing?—a question necessarily edged with the deeper concerns of who I am and what I hold to be true.

All writing, of course, conveys to the reader something of the writer. Too often, however, student papers convey little more than the student's awareness that much of this business of education is essentially phony, that students write papers much as tigers in the circus jump through flaming hoops. The paper is merely an exercise; it conveys nothing of real concern. As teachers, we may attribute the dullness of the writing to a lack of ideas, though I think this is unfair, given the familiar notion that ideas are actually generated by writing: On some level, the student may not have written enough (not enough depth as often as not enough volume). In any case, what students most often lack in their writing is an engagement, both with the subject of the paper and with the writing process itself.

What, then, can I advise my students to aim for as they approach the formidable task of revision? Can an understanding of the mysterious qualities of good writing help students revise their work?

## **Heat and Quickness**

In his introduction to *Best American Poetry 1999*, Robert Bly explains that, as editor of that volume, he selected poems that generate heat. There are several kinds of heat in these poems, according to Bly,

including heat of the blues, heat of the furious daughter and heat of the meadows and the hawks.

Heat is a fairly abstract term, but it is helpful for describing what makes some writing especially good. In explaining what he means by heat, Bly begins by contrasting it with "computer verbiage [which] has become the model of cool and empty language." "The language of the chat rooms," Bly claims, "is empty." By "empty" he means free of all literary style, free of anything that would pin it to a particular generation or place. Heated language, on the other hand, is that which has intensity, that which engages layers of meaning, that which has pungent phrasings; in short, "that sort of language that springs from the fight between God and the donkey." Heat may be associated with the decade in which the writer grew up—writing that is "stung by the mood of an Oklahoma afternoon in the thirties, or the flavor of an Illinois dusk in the forties," or, like the language of Thomas Hardy, "imprisoned in the mood of Sussex in 1880" (19–31).

What Bly is naming "heat" is that which surprises and delights us as we read and, simultaneously, evokes a certain recognition. The writing is terribly, irresistibly alive, as if Clarissa Dalloway had just walked into the room—full skirt, long stride—and flung open the curtains. It is, perhaps, a similar quality that is described by D. H. Lawrence, as cited by John Braine in his book *Writing a Novel*. Lawrence wrote:

We have to choose between the quick and the dead. The quick is God-flame, in everything. And the dead is dead. In this room where I write, there is a little table that is dead: it doesn't even weakly exist. And there is a ridiculous little iron stove, which for some unknown reason is quick. And there is an iron wardrobe trunk, which for some still more mysterious reason is quick. And there are several books, whose mere corpus is dead, utterly dead and non-existent. And there is a sleeping cat, very quick. And a glass lamp, alas, is dead. . . .

And if one tries to find out wherein the quickness of the quick lies, it is in a certain weird relationship between that which is quick and—I don't know, perhaps all the rest of the things. It seems to consist in an odd sort of fluid, changing, grotesque or beautiful relatedness. That silly iron stove somehow *belongs*. Whereas this thin-shanked table doesn't belong. It is a mere disconnected lump, like a cut-off finger. (153–154)

Bly is speaking primarily of poetry; Lawrence, primarily of fiction. But these qualities of heat and quickness also pertain to expository writing. In fact, the difficulty of teaching students how to revise their papers is, in large part, the difficulty of teaching them how to get such qualities into their writing. Perhaps, then, these are useful terms for considering the transition from first to second draft; these terms express, in other words, what I am trying to teach students to revise *toward*.

Often, what students do when they revise their papers is simply to deaden them. Here, let us imagine, is a first draft, which has just the faintest suggestion of life. To be sure, the organizing principle is pure randomness; the grammar, weak; the "its" and "it's" invariably interchanged. And now, here is the revision. "Its" and "it's" have, miraculously, found their proper places. Commas have been inserted with some regard to phrasing. Sentences have been reworked, and the introduction has been rewritten. In fact, there is nothing actually wrong. Only, the paper is unbearable to read. It begins, predictably, "In our society today" and ends, "In conclusion, capital punishment should be abolished." Such writing, as I understand, is what Bly would describe as empty, what D. H. Lawrence would describe as dead. The writing is generic. There is nothing of a particular voice, a particular person. There is no engagement of the writer with his subject, no wrestling, no wrestling from the words that density of meaning that words must yield if we struggle with them enough.

Yet, each of my students has something of importance to say. Each one has something urgent that commands his attention and cries out for articulation. But uncovering this thing-that-needs-to-be-said is a matter of some delicacy. On the one hand, it is a process of self-discovery; as such, it requires permission and encouragement. On the other hand, it is a process of honing language so that meaning becomes increasingly clear; as such, it requires the imposition of restraints. Further, the permission and the restraint should work in synchrony, like two pistons in the same engine, to supply the student both with sufficient energy to see the assignment through and with language fine enough to express his thought.

And this is not all. The thing-that-needs-to-be-said is not just some creative urge or impulse toward self-expression. It has a subject that is not the writer's self. In fact, this thing-that-needs-to-be-said is, and must remain, attached to the assignment. It is the truth about

capital punishment as only one person knows it. The student's immediate task is to find some point of attachment between his desire for self-expression and an "external" subject, one that at least initially lies beyond the limits of his experience. If he is to cross the river that separates him from a body of knowledge that is not yet his own, he must first find the narrowest part of it—a conviction or, at least, an intuition—then construct a bridge across. That bridge will be made of language, though the student needs to possess it and to trust it before he can cross.

Nothing is worth writing unless it carries the writer's conviction. I find that students have not been barred from expressing their convictions; rather, they have been barred from discovering them. They have learned to situate their convictions on a map of clichés, to pin what they think they believe to what is already out there, to existing ideas. Thus, what they find is preconceived: Not only do they avoid working at the process of discovery, which is the real work of revision, but they are bored at the outset. Perhaps too much has been given them—the directions may be overly explicit (narrow down the topic, write an outline, etc.). Perhaps they have no hope that writing papers or doing academic research will enable them to take in some part of the world and enlarge themselves in the process. The map they are guided by may lead them away from, rather than toward, their real subject—the thing they care about. Students do have opinions on capital punishment, abortion, gun control. What they do not have is the possibility of driving off the map, into the woods, and finding out what it is within these large areas that really has meaning for them.

I am not advocating that expository writing courses be turned into creative writing courses. The real task that students have is to write with heat, even when the subject is capital punishment and it is not one's own head that is going to be cut off: They must somehow learn to maintain a certain intensity in the writing, even as the subject moves away from that very central and very dear point of focus—*moi*.

## **Hot Spots**

As teachers, we can help students dig out from the first draft what is potentially there, what is only slightly hinted at or even what the

writing may conceal. We can help students strip away the excess layers of casual, disengaged writing, the writing that carries no conviction, that we read and feel indifferent to—that even the author feels indifferent to. Such writing is of no use to anyone. “Do you really believe this?” and “Do you really care about this?” are questions we might usefully ask.

In practical terms, how might students be helped in getting some heat, or at least some real conviction, into their papers? First, they would do well to learn to identify what is most worth keeping—or pursuing—in a first draft. Peter Elbow has suggested a process he calls “cooking,” or “getting material to interact” (73). He writes:

But a person’s best writing is often all mixed up together with his worst. It all feels lousy to him as he’s writing, but if he will let himself write it and come back later he will find some parts of it are excellent. It is as though one’s best words come wrapped in one’s worst. (69)

But the step between first and second draft is not taken simply by crossing out those worst words. The selection process that Elbow recommends involves additional writing, thinking and letting oneself be struck by what emerges in the writing. Elbow suggests that writers need to locate a “center of gravity,” a part of the writing often not truly visible in a first draft that is found by relaxing control, digressing, exaggerating and letting the writing run in several directions seemingly at once.

In recognition of the aptness of Bly’s terminology, I use the term “hot spot” rather than “center of gravity” to indicate what the writer is trying to find in, or through, a rough draft. By “hot spot” I mean a hint or indication of what is worth carrying forward into the next draft.

Identifying a hot spot involves choosing a bit of the draft at hand—a sentence, a phrase, even a word—as a focal point. The rest becomes momentarily blurry. The choice is not between what is correctly written and what is mechanically flawed. The choice is between what is urgent and true and what isn’t. For the moment, all that is required is honesty on the part of the writer.

The work of discovering the hot spot may best be left to the author of the paper. Thus, in teaching revision, I have found it useful to have students learn to pick out the hot spots in their own first drafts. When we, as teachers, praise particular parts of the writing, when we

are the ones to find the points of strength or intensity, we may be advancing the process, but we are doing little to teach the student to discern what he most truly has to say. Our enthusiasm may actually do more harm than good, as it may blur the line between "hot" (urgent, essential, necessary) and "not-hot." If, on the other hand, the student can identify in a first draft what is essential to retain for the next draft, he is well on his way to producing a piece of writing that is more deeply his own, one that matters more to him. Approaching the writing of the second draft this way, instead of merely tinkering with the first draft, may expand the task of revision but will also enliven it. Therefore, the other aspects of revision—organizing and polishing—are more likely to be undertaken with a greater degree of care.

In the classroom, hot spots can be identified in a number of ways:

1. I have collected the papers and then asked students to write the papers anew in their notebooks;
2. I have collected the papers, taught the class and then, at the end of the period, asked students to write what they remember of their papers;
3. I have asked students to imagine that the building is burning down and they have only enough time to save a single sentence of their papers—which one would they keep?

The first draft is not, with these methods, actually read during revision; it is put aside. It is forgotten or, more accurately, partially forgotten. The usefulness of forgetting as an approach to revision has been noted by the poet and essayist Donald Hall:

Most of my poems spend time in a dark drawer. One thing I've learned: If a poem is . . . if you think that a poem is going wrong, if you feel something fundamentally awry in it, you cannot cure it by changing the punctuation! You cannot bully it into excellence by staring at it every morning! You have to give it time to change itself deeply, which is accomplished only by not-looking at it. When a poem is in a drawer, that drawer is a kind of metaphor. You are putting the poem back into the sleep-place, so that dream and daydream can work it over. You are "forgetting" it, putting it in the *oubliette*. When I have successfully forgotten a poem, I may wake out of sound sleep with a clear notion of a change for it; I may discover lines for it, popping into my head, while I drive to the butcher's. (36)

The sort of “forced forgetting” that comes with the identification of a hot spot works like a filter: What is essential in the first draft flows through into the second draft, whereas whatever is not essential is held back. The second draft does not, at this stage, replace the first; rather, both are acknowledged as possibilities, to be evaluated and compared at a later stage.

Furthermore, the student does not have to deal with that most intractable problem all writers face—the difficulty of tossing page after page of one’s own work into the trash bin. Here, the decision of what to keep and what to toss isn’t made by the writer, at least not consciously; rather, it is built into the system. What is dead for D. H. Lawrence is that which does not belong; in other words, that which we can do without. Like memory, these techniques enable the student to retain only what is essential, which he might not be able to identify by a more intentional process of selection. Like memory, their virtue lies in their ability to cut through excess, redundancy and sheer weak prose.

As it becomes apparent that one can simply let go of parts of the first draft, the student is not only freed from a sheer excess of material, he is also freed from his attachment to particular sentences. It becomes clear that what he has to say can be expressed in several ways—and that some ways may be better than others. Thus, he begins to produce several versions of one part of the paper. The point, however, is not to work through the rest of the first draft and rewrite it in different sentences. The point is to leave the rest aside (it may or may not figure in the final draft), allowing the hot spot to emerge as the generative source of the second draft.

Another strategy for identifying hot spots is to pay extremely careful attention to the language of the first draft: It is often where language shifts slightly that the writer is trying to say something more than what actually got onto the page. I have asked students to run their fingers along the print and to stop at the place where it gets hot, where their fingers start to burn. In this case, of course, I have explained just how they will know when they hit a hot spot. I might give them Bly’s essay to read, or suggest ways in which they might be extremely attentive to their words. I might ask them to look for that phrase or sentence that seems to shimmer, that is somehow distinct from the rest of the paper. A hot spot often appears in the guise of a

reversed sentence structure, another peculiarity in syntax, an odd word, particularly a word that seems too "charged," too emotion-laden for the context. A string of verbs may signify a hot spot, as may a metaphor.

Another indication of a hot spot is the idea that falls off a cliff: An idea is just barely suggested and then, too quickly, dropped. Such cliffhangers often come in the final paragraph of the first draft. It is the idea the student has arrived at through the arduous work of filling with print the assigned number of pages. "Whew! Now I can say it, knowing that my paper is finished and I don't have to write any more." The idea is held out to the reader in a most tantalizing and most frustrating manner. It is often the first good idea in the paper. The second draft needs to start with this, to make it central.

In approaching the second draft as something that grows out of the hot spot, the student shifts his focus away from what initially appeared to be his main concern but really wasn't. The first draft may have been weak because it radiated from a false center. The response is to help the student resituate that center. The one good idea in the first draft, or at least the indication of an idea, or, failing that, some linguistic formulation to which the student is committed, now becomes the focus of the second draft. The rest of the second draft will provide the context or setting for that idea. Lawrence's notion of quickness, turned around, becomes the problem of finding the particular setting that brings an object to life; it is the relationship of the object to the rest of the room that gives us the sense of the object's "quickness"—and so it is with the central idea of the paper. It is the context constructed around it that will serve to sustain the vibrancy of the central idea. The second draft, then, is built up like a series of concentric rings around the hot spot.

Finding hot spots is a method for generating a second draft that goes deeper than the first. Hot spots, like thermal springs, may be indicative of the sort of bedrock that lies beneath, the belief or the assumption that needs to be explored, whose exploration is, in fact, what the paper ought to address. With this method, revision proceeds from what is potentially strongest in the draft at hand and what is, thereby, most likely to give rise to a stronger, more accurately focused second draft.

## **From a Fountain, Flowing**

The second draft generated by the methods outlined above is not, however, a final draft. In fact, it is likely to be less well organized than the first draft and may even be bursting apart at the seams. In a sense, the organizational scheme has shifted from a linear one (such as would be achieved with a conventional outline) to something like a fountain, a central source or spring giving out concentric waves. The next step in the process, of course, is to look more carefully at the overall cohesion and to restore a logical, linear progression to the work.

The problem of overall cohesion, however, is not in practice separable from examining the validity of the ideas expressed. That is, where something is to be placed in the paper depends largely on its relationship to the rest, rather than on any absolute truth. The questions of whether the ideas are valid and where they best fit, in turn, are not easily separated from whether their rendition is sufficiently precise for the writer's purpose. Refining ideas through experimentation with language—comparing alternative formulations—is how the writer makes sense of them, how he decides whether his words convey to the reader what he thinks they do, whether the reader takes from his sentences what he thinks he has put in. Often the idea does belong, but not in the way it has so far been expressed. The comparison of alternative formulations is not as easy as it may seem. No word is better than another in any absolute sense; every choice the writer makes depends on context and on purpose. Choosing among alternative formulations requires a sensitivity to each of the variable elements of the sentence (diction, syntax, sentence structure, etc.), a sensitivity that embraces both the aural and the logical.

If a student is to consider two versions of a text or even two versions of a sentence, he must have some criteria by which to evaluate which version is better for his purpose. The problem is how the same thought might be said differently and how it might be said better; how, that is, he might say what he means more exactly. In order to work at this level, students need to have at their command a range of possibilities. Sometimes the student cannot evaluate his idea because its articulation is too lax and unspecific; it is almost as if the idea is not "large" enough—the student can't really step inside it and examine it

from the inside. The sentence that best fits the student's intention may be a sentence he cannot yet formulate, or even recognize if it is formulated for him. The difficulty of choosing one version over another is often exacerbated by the unfamiliarity with more elaborate language. The language that he needs may not yet be the student's own; it is not his usual mode of expression.

Helping students revise their papers (particularly the revision that transforms the second draft into the third draft) hinges on being able to provide them with a larger range of choices, but not so large a range that they feel they are out of their depth—a difficult job, indeed. Of course, these choices cannot be served up to students but must be elicited from them. A larger vocabulary, a greater variety of sentence structures and a more extensive knowledge of how syntax can be varied to achieve certain effects would all be beneficial to my students. In fact, the dullness of many of the papers I read can be attributed to a lack of variation of sentence structure. The kinds of sentences that the student has available may be so limited that it is as if a ceiling has been placed low in the room of his thought.

There is nothing wrong, of course, with offering examples. I could write on the board a series of sentences that go from cold to hot, in Bly's terms, or from dead to quick, in Lawrence's. But encouraging students to incorporate heightened language for the sake of doing so is not equivalent to teaching them to write. In another sense, though, one does learn by example: It is certainly possible to learn a lot about how to write by absorbing examples of great prose. In fact, this may be the only way that certain aspects of writing—syntax, cadence—can be learned. But years of exposure are necessary. For most of my students, those years have simply been lost. Lost to television, lost to the Internet or lost to the lousy prose that apparently constitutes so much of what kids read in high school. Good examples do teach, but only over a period of what I would call geologic time, the slow time it takes for rainwater to replenish an aquifer, deep underground. In that time frame, the examples will eventually filter down. But that time is vast: No visible improvement is likely to occur this semester or even this year.

As a teacher, of course, I can assign reading that is more sophisticated than what my students are accustomed to; by doing so, I hope to improve their ability to match what they are trying to say to what

they type into their computers. I mention the problem of reading in a large sense here, in closing, because I think that my students' difficulties with writing largely stem from a lack of sustained reading of complex material. It is not clear to me how their writing can be more sophisticated than the reading they have done so far. Thus, as teachers and writing tutors, we would do well to acknowledge that we are dealing with problems that can be only partially addressed in the classroom or the tutoring session, and I hope that my remarks about finding hot spots will be of some use in that situation. The greater problem of diminished literacy must be addressed at other levels.

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# Manuel Puig, Pedro Almodóvar and the Politics of Camp

BY GRAZIANA RAMSDEN

In an Argentine prison, A.D. 1974, Luis Alberto Molina sings passionate boleros to his cellmate and lover, political prisoner Valentín, shortly before being released and dying by the hand of Valentín's *compañeros*.

In Madrid, A.D. 1986, Antonio plays a heart-wrenching bolero to his lover Pablo shortly before committing suicide to avoid being arrested for murdering Pablo's ex-lover Juan.

These brief plot summaries are fragments respectively from the works of Argentine novelist Manuel Puig and of Spanish filmmaker Pedro Almodóvar. The first achieved fame in the U.S. for the novel turned film and Broadway musical *Kiss of the Spider Woman*; the second for controversial films such as *Tie Me Up! Tie Me Down!* and *Kika*, which scandalized U.S. audiences in the late eighties with their portrayal of violent, albeit ironically so, relationships.

Manuel Puig was among the first Latin American writers to create innovative, experimental literature out of the materials of mass culture. In so doing, he has reversed the traditional hierarchy of "high" and "low" culture, and the creative role of such diverse elements as popular music (particularly the tango and the bolero), B movies and the classic formulas of film and literary melodrama, from serial romance and the detective story to the radio soaps and classic Hollywood films.

Pedro Almodóvar is the artist whose work most resembles Puig's in terms of a redemptive reevaluation of a shared mass and popular culture, both regional and global, and its impact on the formation of a global culture that transcends national boundaries.

Here I contextualize Puig's and Almodóvar's treatment of popular culture forms within the aesthetics of camp, which I define not only as an aesthetic sensibility that exalts artifice and excess (Sontag 107) but also as an "operation of taste" (Ross 136) that retrieves the discarded "low" cultural products, resurrects and reconceptualizes them. In addition to that, and contrary to an early understanding of camp as apolitical, when defined as "queer parody" (Meyer 1), camp is an oppositional discourse that exposes the inconsistencies of gender categories and roles, and critiques as well as transgresses the boundaries of sexual representation.

From the start, Puig's and Almodóvar's creations are situated here within the framework of postmodernism to provide a cultural as well as historical milieu.

While postmodernism has manifested itself in various disciplines such as art, architecture, music, film, literature, sociology, communications, fashion and technology, it eludes a temporal categorization, since opinions differ on its exact inception, except for the obvious chronological indication that it follows modernism. If only for didactic purposes, postmodernism has been characterized in contrast to modernism to signify a continuity with as well as a break with the modernist aesthetics and practices (Habermas; Huyssen; HUTCHEON; Herman). Modernism sought to disrupt the conventions of 19th-century art, the most relevant here being the representational mode of realism. In addition to that, the advent of Freudian psychoanalysis opened a new realm of investigation for artists, providing additional insight into the dynamics of the mind. Consequently, from a literary perspective, modernism highlights subjectivity in writing by stressing the importance of individual perception and advocating a movement away from objectivity in narration. As a result of that, modernism promotes experimentation, as stream-of-consciousness writing and the abandonment of an objective omniscient narrative point of view, both of which predominate in the fragmented and discontinuous modernist novel. The bourgeois society spawned by the industrialization of the second half of the 19th century is the target of the

modernist critique not only for its inherent materialist qualities but also because of the modernist hostility toward progress and technology. Postmodernism continues modernist experimentation by rejecting rigid genre conventions as well as by portraying decentered subjectivities; but in contrast to the profound modernist pessimism, postmodernism seems to celebrate the alienation of the subject and the incoherence of history.

In Latin America, an important literary phenomenon coincides with and mirrors the aesthetic and literary tenets of modernism: the so-called *boom* of the Latin American new novel, which features works of such writers as Carlos Fuentes, Gabriel García Márquez, Mario Vargas Llosa and Julio Cortázar. Roberto González Echevarría, following John Barth, situates the *boom* alongside modern literature: "What Barth and his predecessors call modern literature corresponds to the Boom, especially *Hopscotch* by Cortázar . . . *The Death of Artemio Cruz*, *Infante's Inferno* (247). Echevarría finds the discriminating aspect between the *boom* novel and the so-called *posboom* in the influence of high modernists Joyce and Faulkner, evident in the use of experimental literary techniques, such as stream of consciousness and fragmented narration, as opposed to postmodern narrative, which features the return to a reader-friendly narration. José Donoso, himself a *boom* front liner, divides the *boom* into two phases: a first generation, which includes the novelists also mentioned by Echevarría, and a second generation, "a pop answer" (124) to the first generation, which comprises, among others, Puig, Severo Sarduy and Guillermo Cabrera Infante. Donoso lists as characteristics of the "pop" *boom*:

the contamination with foreign languages and literatures, the contact with other forms and arts, such as film, painting, or poetry, the inclusion of various dialects and lingos and mannerisms of specialized groups, the acceptance of the requirements of the fantastic, the subjective, the marginalized. (28)

The works of Puig, typified by his incorporation of the discourses of "pop" materials, such as Hollywood film, popular music, romance and mystery novels; by his crafting of unique character voices, as exemplified by *Betrayed by Rita Hayworth* (1968); and by his attention to sexuality, are representative of the aesthetics of the *posboom*, alongside the work of, for example, Gustavo Sáinz and Elena Poniatowska

from Mexico, Luisa Valenzuela and Ricardo Piglia from Argentina, Ariel Dorfman and Antonio Skármeta from Chile, Cristina Peri Rossi from Uruguay and Guillermo Cabrera Infante and Reynaldo Arenas from Cuba. The transition from *boom* to *posboom* is really quite fluid since writers such as Vargas Llosa (*Aunt Julia and the Scriptwriter* [1977]) and Cortázar (*We Love Glenda So Much* [1980]) toyed with pop culture materials such as the radio soap opera and Hollywood cinema. Yet critics have pointed out tensions between *boom* and *posboom* in the former's extreme emphasis on technique and language as well as a universalizing though elitist attitude of the former in contrast to "the conscious return to referentiality, to emotion and the love-ideal, to social commitment, ideology and protest" (Shaw 12), in addition to the latter's incorporation of the pop culture discourse as an implicit criticism of the previous generation. Furthermore, the *posboom* as well as postmodern art in general, places a strong emphasis on sexuality and the body, resulting in a privileged voicing of the desire of "women, homosexuals, lesbians, drug addicts, transsexuals, transvestites" (Varderi 33).

If the *posboom* is an early indication of postmodernism in Latin America, postmodern practice is fully recognizable in Spain in the cultural phenomenon of *la movida*, which took place after the death of Francisco Franco (1976). In the attempt to break with 40 years of military regime, which had imposed strict censorship, the youth of Spain supported the political struggles of the seventies such as women's and gay rights, and imitated pop culture tendencies of Great Britain and the U.S. such as punk, glam rock, the hippie movement and the drug culture (Vernon and Morris 5). Since the image of the new Spain did not match the one that had been "sold" to the summer tourists by the Franco regime in the fifties and sixties, the *movida* satirized the iconography of the bullfight, of the flamenco and the *canción española*. The art of the *movida* was iconoclastic and often imitated pop culture materials such as the comic strip, as in the graphic art of Ceesepé and Javier Mariscal, as well as the trashy, "underground" aesthetics of pornography and of punk, epitomized by rock groups Alaska y los Pegamoides and Kaka de Luxe. Almodóvar's first films situate themselves within the *movida*; and what is more, his first two feature films, *Pepi, Luci, Bom and the Girls of the Heap* and *Labyrinth of Passions*, are to be considered documentary of the *movida*, not only because they reflect its innovative, distorting and gender-bending spirit but also for

their rough, improvisational quality of sound and cinematic narration (Vernon and Morris 7).

A common ground between Puig and Almodóvar as postmodern artists as well as prominent figures of their cultural period of activity is the rejection of the canonic modernist and premodernist distinction between "high" and "low" culture in favor of a wider selection of materials used to produce art. Postmodern narrative, for example, thrives on the reelaboration or "transcontextualization" of recognizable "low" or popular culture elements, thus drawing attention to itself as an artifact evolved from and influenced by other artifacts. This mechanism of "transcontextualization," also known as parody or "imitation with critical distance" (Hutcheon, *Parody* 2), repeats the conventions of cultural materials, both "high" and "low," yet invests them with a subversive meaning that works as a critique of as well as a tribute to the parodied text. When borrowing those conventions, parody takes on not only an aesthetic valence but also, and most importantly, an ideological and critical implication. Linda Hutcheon's definition of parody diverges from the traditional understanding of parody as a parasitic form intended to ridicule a text. Some critics of postmodernism, notably Fredric Jameson, arguing that postmodern art passively reproduces past forms, lean on a "negative" concept of parody as a mocking tool, and identify parody as pastiche: "Pastiche is blank parody . . . the imitation of a peculiar or unique style . . . without the satirical impulse" (16). Whereas Jameson's pastiche is a form of nostalgia, an ahistorical, acritical form of citation, Hutcheon's parody, "a double process of installing and ironizing" (*Politics* 93), foregrounds not only the continuity with past forms but also the ideological implications resulting from ironic reinterpretations of the past.

In this regard, it can be argued that both Puig and Almodóvar cultivate a parodic model in their works, especially in their ironic treatment of melodrama and of the melodramatic mode, whose conventions, again, they borrow and repeat with critical as well as elevating intentions. As for Puig, his novel *Heartbreak Tango* was defined as parody by Severo Sarduy in his article "Notes to the Notes to the Notes," itself highly parodic, mixing textual analysis with long quotations of romance novels by Corín Tellado and fragments protagonized by his own character Cobra from his homonymous 1972 novel. The Cuban writer argues that in Puig's second novel:

The genre turns upon itself, places its object at a distance, and circumscribes it, escaping its image and pointing at it, revealing without abandoning it, but undermining with a tender smile the density of its conventions and the network of its grammar. (625)

Sarduy derives his concept of parody, via Julia Kristeva, from Mikhail Bakhtin, and paraphrases his notion of parody as a form that "both glorifies and mocks its 'paragram'" (626), which in *Boquitas pintadas* is the serial novel or *folletín*. In a 1972 interview and later in 1983 (Corbatta 597), Puig rejected the "parodic" definition of his novels, assuming that that qualification would diminish his characters: "I looked up various dictionaries and they all said the same: <<parody, mocking imitation>>. I assure you that my intention is never to mock my characters" (Rodríguez Monegal, *Folletín* 29). Yet in the postmodern sense, parody as imitation with distance, as proposed by Sarduy and Hutcheon, can be perceived as a dominant characteristic throughout Puig's novels, in their free mixing of popular culture elements such as film and popular music, and composite texture that attracts attention to itself as a creation that recycles and recontextualizes those very elements.

Similarly, Almodóvar's films have been defined as parodic for their reinterpretation, both aesthetic and critical of the cultural traditions of Spain (Yarza 35–37). More recently, Mark Allinson has advanced the theory that parody is Almodóvar's "general mode of address," a questioning tool to mediate "national identity, power and gender relations, sexuality, history, politics, cultural traditions, visual and musical choices" (213). In a 1987 interview, in reference to his unique tone and blend of genres and discourses, Almodóvar admitted: "In my films, everything is just at the border of parody. It's not only parody. It's also the borderline of the ridiculous and the grotesque" (Kinder 37). The crossing of borderlines is characteristic also of Almodóvar cinematography, one that often represents the *atrezzo*, or the cinematic apparatus of filming, alongside dubbing and editing as a self-conscious reminder of the artificial nature of film as representation.

The mass culture entertainment products parodied by postmodern art can be referred to as kitsch, a nomenclature that gathers the artificial as well as the sensationalist object under the category of bad

taste. Matei Calinescu specifies that kitsch is an incongruous product of modernity, one that opposes the innovative, progressive spirit of the modern era by emphasizing an unrefined, naïf, candid imitation of art: "Modernity and kitsch—the notions might seem mutually exclusive . . . modernity implies antitraditional presentness . . . while kitsch . . . suggests repetition, banality, triteness" (225–226). Gillo Dorfles adds to the unoriginal nature of kitsch a sentimental quality that transforms an artistic phenomenon into a banal, unnatural object: For Dorfles, the essence of kitsch is "the falsification of sentiments and the substitution of spurious sentiments for real ones" (221). In Spain, Ramón Gómez de la Serna translates kitsch into "*lo cursi*," a mixture of exaggeration and decadence in objects.

A more rigorous critique of kitsch is elaborated by Celeste Olalquiaga, who in *Megalopolis* describes three "degrees" of kitsch "according to their means of production and cultural function" (42). The first degree is "what is usually referred to in discussions of kitsch" (43), based on an innocent, indexical relationship between reality and representation. The second degree of kitsch or "neo-kitsch" (45) profits from an "acquired taste for tackiness. It is a popularization of the camp sensibility, a perspective wherein appreciation of the "ugly" conveys an . . . ironic enjoyment from a position of enlightened superiority" (45). Finally, the third degree of kitsch is made legitimate by being "recycled" into a work of art (47). Olalquiaga's third degree of kitsch, which she exemplifies in the contemporary Chicana and Nuyorican reinterpretation of the home altar, closely resembles the postmodern process of parody: Both transcontextualize and redeem the kitsch object from "trash" into part of an artwork without losing sight of the nature of kitsch; both conduct an implicit critique of the kitsch object as well as its means of production.

The presence of bad taste, kitsch or *cursi* materials is endemic in Puig's novels; in a 1981 interview, when questioned on the reasoning behind his predilection for kitsch, he stated:

I was always interested in popular genres. . . . I have been able to discover certain elements in these minor genres . . . the intrigue, the care to maintain the reader's attention, the narrative agility and the use of sentiment . . . the sentimental stuff is part of human experience. (Almada Roche 42)

In a recent study, Alberto Giordano explains the kitsch and *cursi* references in Puig's novels as "a manifestation of the lack of authenticity, the imposture and the conservatism that characterize the morals of the petit bourgeois society" (89). Giordano invokes Calinescu's definition of kitsch as "the expression of the lifestyle of the middle classes" (258), whose study is privileged in Puig's early novels. Following Olalquiaga, we can establish Puig's and Almodóvar's kitsch as "third-degree" kitsch, which parody legitimizes into a work of art. Clear examples of kitsch in Puig's novels can be found in Esther's diary in *Betrayed by Rita Hayworth*, which mimics the excessive melodramatic tone of the prose of the Perón era (MacAdam 58–59); in the radio soap "The Wounded Captain" in *Heartbreak Tango*, which excites Mabel and Nené with its suspenseful action and whispered dialogues; in the emphatic recitation of poetry of Clara Evelia in *The Buenos Aires Affair*, and the poetry recital she organizes, which embodies the spectacular and artificial qualities of kitsch; in Molina's film narrations in *Kiss of the Spider Woman*, especially *Destiny*, the invented Nazi film, and in Ana's dreams in *Pubis Angelical*, for their sentimental and outlandish nature. Puig parodies kitsch without condemning it ("I don't condemn kitsch" [Rodríguez Monegal 29]), and kitsch is elevated to the status of art within the "serious" genre of the novel.

Almodóvar, like Puig, has expressed a predilection for kitsch materials: In an interview released at the time of *The Flower of My Secret* (1995), he made a strikingly similar statement to the one by Puig I reported earlier:

I have always been interested in subgenres . . . of literature, of film, of video, of soap operas, of music, etc., because there is a large freedom and a lot of humor in them. (Harguindegay 5)

Almodóvar's kitsch feeds on the Catholic iconography, particularly prominent in films such as *Dark Habits*, *Law of Desire* and *Tie Me Up! Tie Me Down!*. Here kitsch is subject to a mechanism of ironic reappropriation and parodic reinterpretation of a specifically Spanish imagery into third-degree kitsch, a mechanism that Alejandro Yarza finds inescapably political, as it liberates and reappropriates the kitsch objects from the fascist ideology of the Franco regime (17). In *Dark Habits*, for example, the convent of the Humbled Redeemers is popu-

lated by either junkie (Sister Manure) or sex-crazed (Sister Rat) nuns, which satirically points to the disjunction, long repressed by the Catholic Church, between religious belief and worldly desires. In *Law of Desire*, Tina builds a *cruz de mayo*, a kitsch altar to the Virgin Mary populated by pictures and figurines of Marilyn Monroe and Barbie dolls. In *Atame*, the *Sagrado corazón*, a popular picture of Jesus and Mary, resembles Andy Warhol's serial portrait of Marilyn Monroe in its sequential repetition. Gonzalo Navajas justifies Almodóvar's religious kitsch as an aesthetic minimization, which "is most eficientes en el modo estético de Almodóvar y tiene una función útil en el modelo cultural español, que tradicionalmente ha conferido demasiada importancia a ciertas categorías ideológicas, cuya defensa se ha priorizado" (Navajas 71).

While describing the second degree of kitsch, Olalquiaga makes reference to the camp sensibility described by Susan Sontag in her pioneer article "Notes on Camp": Olalquiaga's emphasis is on camp's ironic reevaluation of the kitsch object, as opposed to the innocent, ersatz quality of first-degree kitsch. Sontag's article defined camp as a sensibility or "a certain mode of aestheticism . . . one way of seeing the world as an aesthetic phenomenon in terms of artifice and stylization" (106). Her emphasis is on the frivolous aspects of camp, on its privileging of style at the expense of content, which determines an unconditional acceptance of kitsch: "Camp does not reverse things. It doesn't argue that the good is bad, or the bad is good. What it does is offer for art (and life) a different—and supplementary—set of standards" (114). This statement proves true when considering Puig's and Almodóvar's camp preference for kitsch materials, which is characterized by an ironic position that accentuates the artifice inherent in the kitsch object. In addition to that, as Paul Julian Smith notes, the frivolous undertone of their work is perhaps connected to the fact that they often place feminine (or female-identified) characters in a prominent narrative place, which has led critics to dismiss especially Almodóvar's body of work as "kitsch" for the widespread disrepute of the register of popular culture, generally coded as "feminine" (2). This argument can be reversed in terms of a reevaluation or reaffirmation of kitsch, which, to a certain extent, can be established specifically in its association with the feminine (Modleski 24).

Since it favors the "looks" of things, Sontag qualifies camp as "apolitical" (107), yet the camp perspective of the artists under consideration

here results intrinsically subversive, in that the sentimental and artificial qualities of kitsch are turned against themselves in the dynamics of parody. An important point in Sontag's essay is that the practice of camp is not restricted to homosexuals, although the author recognizes the presence of "a peculiar affinity" (117) between camp and homosexuality, since homosexuals are the "creators of sensibilities" (118).

Andrew Ross's essay "Uses of Camp" also establishes a relationship between camp and kitsch, where the latter, "the detritus of fashion . . . history's waste" (151), is salvaged and rediscovered by the "collector mode" of camp: Camp constitutes "an operation of taste" (136) that retrieves and "revamps" the "low" culture objects. In a camp frame of mind, Puig compared his concept of art, as informed by "low" culture materials, to his character Gladys's sculptures in *The Buenos Aires Affair*, which are made with the debris left behind by the tide: "I entirely share Gladys's concept of art" (Corbatta 59). Ross's definition of camp diverges from Sontag's view when he establishes a political agenda for the exercise of camp, since the objective of its salvaging operation is to expose the inadequacy not only of standards of taste but also of a system of values that excludes the homosexual from the social and cultural practices of the dominant ideology. The exercise of camp contains "an explicit commentary on feats of *survival* in a world dominated by the taste, interests, and definitions of others" (144). This tactic becomes feasible for gay rights advocate Jack Babuscio when accompanied by irony and humor, two of the four basic features of camp (the other two being theatricality and aestheticism). Irony, "the subject matter of camp" (20), relies on a perceived incongruity between an object and its context; humor, "the strategy of camp" (27), is a way to deal with that incongruity by means of laughter. Though conveying a comic perception of the world, Babuscio also argues that the quick wit of camp is an indirect expression of anger or an attempt to confront the rage that originates in the oppression and the exclusion of the homosexuals: "Camp can be . . . a means of illustrating those cultural ambiguities and contradictions that oppress us all" (28).

Forms of camp humor are found in Puig's and Almodóvar's work in varying degrees: The latter's has evolved from a crazy, black humor that bordered on the scatological, in episodes such as the peeing scene of *Pepi, Luci, Bom . . .* and the *portera* with diarrhea in *Labyrinth of*

*Passions*, into a more refined, less scatological humor as exemplified by the feuding mother and daughter in *The Flower of My Secret* and in the life story of La Agrado in *All About My Mother*. Almodóvar's camp humor has often been misunderstood and harshly criticized in instances such as the imprisonment and bondage of Marina in *Atame* and the "rape" scene in *Kika*. The latter, though ironic in its political reference and cinematic arrangement (Kika's position on the "bottom" as the position for women in society; Juana, bound, gagged, with her back to the rape pointing to the silence often destined to domestic violence episodes), has been rendered as demeaning and humiliating to women in its depiction of violence against them (Martín-Márquez 30) and was assigned an NC-17 rating in the United States.

Puig's camp humor, though perhaps less jarring than Almodóvar's, is pervasive throughout his work and most noticeable in *The Buenos Aires Affair*, which presents exaggerated characters with excessive sexual needs, and in *Kiss of the Spider Woman*, whose protagonist Molina is the epitome of the camp aesthete. While recounting film plots to his cellmate Valentín, Molina often mentions details of the dress worn by the female protagonists and set decoration: When narrating the zombie film, he remembers that the protagonist is:

not very tall, a French actress, but busty and thin at the same time, with a tiny waist, a really tight evening gown, with lots of cleavage, strapless, remember?

-No.

-Yes, come on, those that looked like they were serving you their tits on a tray.

- Don't make me laugh, please.

-Those boned gowns, with wires sown inside. And they were like: Would you like some tit? (122)

This passage is one among many in Puig's novels that combine a camp delight in the details of an elaborate costume with a comic perception of the artifice of fashion; yet this combination clashes ironically with the fact that, aside from the humorous detail, the two parties in the conversation are in prison, far from the glitz and the glamour of the silver screen.

Babuscio notes that, in its blending of the comic and the serious, camp representation has often been overlooked or dismissed as zany or odd;

yet through its presentation of irony and humor, it consents to observe "serious" issues from a detached position, and "after the event, we are struck by the emotional and moral implications of what we have almost passively absorbed" (28). The "serious" considerations, especially concerning sexuality and gender, are central to camp representation, in spite of its tongue-in-cheek mockery. As a character states in the groundbreaking notes on camp in Christopher Isherwood's 1954 novel *The World in the Evening*: "You can't camp about something you don't take seriously; you're not making fun of it; you're making fun out of it" (54).

The sexual liberation movement in the late sixties and early seventies brought about a radically different social critique that made necessary a rethinking not only of the structure of society and of the roles individuals played but also of the weight of gender and sexuality in the determination of those roles. At that time, besides its aesthetic character as a sensibility, camp also assumed a political signification as the oppositional discourse of the "queer." This latter term was now a reappropriation of the derogatory label that had often been used to indicate the homosexual as well as a confrontational strategy to "fling back at America an ugly word that the country had used to oppress nonstraight people" (Benshoff 7). When the AIDS crisis exploded in the eighties, activist groups such as Queer Nation were formed to demand that the U.S. government respond not only to the health concerns but also to issues of discrimination. In academia, Queer Theory, as the theoretical arm of Queer Nation, focuses specifically on the reconsideration of sexuality as a sociocultural product and not as a biological identity or an anatomical property. In addition to that, Queer Theory investigates the aesthetic representations of sexual behavior (be it hetero-, homo- or bisexual, sadomasochistic or disabled, transgender or transvestite, etc.) not so much taking into account prohibitions and restrictions but rather in light of the consequent proliferation of pleasures associated with it (Spargo 23).

Puig had advanced a similar "theorization" of sexuality in a 1979 interview, where he expressed his conception of sexuality not in terms of homo- or heterosexuality but of bisexuality: "For me the only natural sexuality is bisexuality: that is, *total* sexuality. . . . With a person of your own gender, with a person of the opposite gender, with an animal, with a plant, with anything" (Christ 574). In the last footnote of

*El beso de la mujer araña*, "disguised" as Danish sexologist Anneli Taube, Puig had already advocated in favor of bisexuality following Dennis Altman's proposal (*Homosexuality: Oppression and Liberation* [1971]) that the lack of models of bisexuality obliges males and females into accepting, often unwillingly, the gender roles established by society (Christ 210–211). In the interview, he objected to the restrictive but socially approved categorizations of homosexuality and heterosexuality: "I see exclusive homosexuality and exclusive heterosexuality as cultural results, not as natural outcome. If people were really free, I think they wouldn't choose within the limits of one sex" (Christ 574). In spite of the partial, "queer" nature of these statements, Puig refused to insist on the political possibilities of his work, especially because he disapproved of the militant, "segregationalist" attitude of U.S. gay groups: "I see a great danger in the American attitude, and that's in the way homosexuals tend to think of themselves as totally different from heterosexuals and segregate themselves drastically" (Christ 574). Later, on the occasion of the premiere of a stage adaptation of *Kiss of the Spider Woman*, in a piece called "The Gay Error" (1985), Puig defended the character of Molina against the charges that he lacked sufficient heroism to be upheld as a symbol of underground gay resistance (Levine 262).

In a sort of "Almodóvar A–Z" article, under the heading *sexo* and again in a strikingly similar vein as Puig's statement reported earlier, the Spanish filmmaker states: "I define myself as pansexual. I like any kind of sex, even those that haven't been invented yet" (Zemignan 12). One of the first European directors to position gay and lesbian, as well as transgendered and transvestite, characters in the spotlight, Almodóvar represented sexuality as typified by multiple sexual choices: Examples of this are Riza in *Labyrinth of Passions*, a confused and traumatized bisexual, who finds happiness with nymphomaniac Sexilia; Tina in *Law of Desire*, who as a young boy changed sex to please her father, and who, after being abandoned by him, becomes a lesbian; Letal in *High Heels*, a heterosexual man who goes undercover as a drag queen to investigate crimes and, while in drag, has intercourse with Rebeca. Some critics have argued that Almodóvar's sexually coded narratives are intended as a shock tactic to open a debate on sexuality in Spain (Allinson 93), yet, from a Queer point of view, the interesting aspect of such a depiction of endless sexual possibilities is

found in the Spanish filmmaker's rejection of a fixed sexual identity in favor of "a celebration of the 'unnaturalness' and fluidity of all sexuality" (Burston 142).

Queer Theory finds its stronghold in Michel Foucault's work, which defined sexuality as a construct of various discourses such as medicine and the law; in Eve K. Sedgwick's deconstructive approach to the human dynamics of Western culture and to the binarism of hetero-/homo- sexuality; and in Judith Butler's feminist revisit of performance theory to explain sexuality and gender as acts that humans learn and interiorize through repetition. Within this context, Moe Meyer, borrowing Hutzcheon's concept of parody as imitation with critical distance, argues that camp functions as "queer parody" (1), a political and critical signifying practice that makes evident the power relationships between social agents such as the law, the media and organized religion that codify certain texts, and those texts that subversively recodify them through parody. Camp in these textual practices renders the homosexual identity visible through representation: "The function of camp . . . is the production of queer visibility" (5). This phenomenon is openly dealt with in Puig's *Kiss of the Spider Woman* and in Almodóvar's *Law of Desire*, which, by foregrounding gay characters, not only entail a request to Spanish-speaking audiences to acknowledge homosexuality as a lifestyle but also imply an inevitable identification of the sexuality of the fictional characters with their creators'.

In spite of its politicization, camp productivity has obviously remained inseparable from a focus on style, whether with a critical aim or for its inspirational qualities. Witness to this is the excess that typifies the representational aspects of camp, intensified by the overwhelming presence of sensual details and of artifice, as we can observe in Almodóvar's rich color scheme and elaborate sets, and in Puig's ornate descriptions, as well as his focus on sentiments and sensations. Such excess is often incongruous with the narratives of camp, which tend to focus, as Johannes von Moltke explains, on the "dialectics of social power and sexual desire" (80). In his article on the films of German director Rainer W. Fassbinder, von Moltke argues that melodrama is a very fertile terrain not only for camp representation but also for the deconstruction of sexuality essential to queer critique. Regardless of the specifically queer essence of camp, a striking simi-

larity exists between "the generic excesses of the melodramatic mode and the excessive reading performed along the lines of camp" (82).

Melodrama lends itself to the camp project insofar as it is a very popular film genre as well as a pervasive mode of representation. The "melodramatic mode" seems to be a common narrative principle in contemporary narratives. Peter Brooks proposes a theorization of the melodramatic mode as a "mode of conception and expression, as a certain fictional system making sense of experience" (xiii), characterized by reliance on excess, on "the desire to express all" (4) in a manner that appeals to the senses of the reader by exploiting sensation, suspense and titillation. The melodramatic mode, as an organized body of fictional conventions, can be considered an accessory to the narrative in various genres, from novel (mystery, gothic, romance) to film (noir, horror, Westerns, musicals) to music (tango, bolero, love song): It does not determine the genre itself but characterizes an episode in the narration or the actions and reactions of a character.

Camp fascination with classic cinema and its stars described by Ross consents to indulge in the old-Hollywood glamour and theatricality. Puig, as has been extensively pointed out by critics, was attracted to the silver screen to the point of incorporating its stars as characters in his novels: In *Betrayed by Rita Hayworth*, for example, the character of Doña Sol, played by the actress in *Blood and Sand*, marks a defining moment in the narrative, when little Toto comes to the realization that not all wicked characters are ugly, and it is exactly that wickedness that made the character of Doña Sol attractive to his father. In *Pubis Angelical*, one of Ana's dreams resembles Hedy Lamarr's life story, first as the wife of a jealous millionaire with a Nazi connection and later as a misunderstood actress in Hollywood. The epigraphs of *The Buenos Aires Affair*, taken from Hollywood films starring the most acclaimed classic Hollywood stars of the thirties and forties (Joan Crawford, Bette Davis, Marlene Dietrich, Greta Garbo), form a sort of camp goddess pantheon, where their impressive star power becomes a synonym of ideal womanhood for the camp aesthete. Almodóvar has shown the same attachment to classic Hollywood, though his preference is extended to the stars of the fifties and sixties: In addition to the pervasive visual references to Marilyn Monroe (witness an early picture of himself and his brother Tinín in front of the famous *Bus*

*Stop poster), in the closing credits of All About My Mother, he dedicates the Oscar-winning film to Bette Davis, Gena Rowlands and Romy Schneider as a tribute “to all the actresses who have played actresses” and as homage to the theatrical quality of the performative art *par excellence*.*

In addition to paying homage to Hollywood glamour, camp cinephilia also critiques the sexual roles and rigid identities portrayed in the highly deterministic plots of melodrama. A theatrical genre before the days of cinema, melodrama presents highly emotional as well as sensational situations featuring characters generally divided between villains and victims. The ethical foundation of melodrama is the inevitable triumph of good over evil, which reflects not only the highly moralistic premise of the genre but also its bourgeois idealism. Feminist criticism in the seventies and eighties revealed how melodrama, especially the classic Hollywood films, offered an undignified portrait of women to match “the needs of the patriarchal psyche” (Gledhill 1), which favors highly stereotyped characters and a veiled though omnipresent concern for sex and sexuality. Up until the end of the sixties, before the modernist separation between “high” and “low” culture was reconsidered, melodrama was negatively classified among those cultural products that addressed a massified audience. Its “low” cultural status was accentuated by its simplistic emotional and moralist nature as well as by its appeal to women; in fact, from the thirties through the sixties, melodrama became synonymous with “the woman’s film,” and treated “‘female’ problems revolving around domestic life, the family, children, self-sacrifice” (Doane 3). Regarding the assumption that a genre that appealed to women had to be considered “low” culture, Molly Haskell rightly seethed: “The concept of a ‘woman’s film,’ and of ‘women’s fiction’ as a separate category of art (and/or kitsch) . . . carries the implication that women, and therefore women’s emotional problems, are of minor significance” (153). The association between melodrama and kitsch is not accidental: At the heart of kitsch lies a sentimentality that has the ability to transform any object into something banal and unnatural (Dorfles 221); similarly at the heart of melodrama lies the same sentimentality that has the power to alter emotions into an excessive double—happiness becomes ecstasy; sadness, despair; and spontaneity, theatricality. In addition to that, both address the same massified audience who see

their moral values embodied in melodrama and their artistic aspirations expressed by kitsch.

Intended for women, melodrama was populated by female characters who have become synonymous with it (Mildred Pierce, Stella Dallas, Jezebel, Queen Christina) and with their stars (Joan Crawford, Barbara Stanwyck, Bette Davis, Greta Garbo). In their reprise of the melodramatic tradition, Puig and Almodóvar often place female (or female-identified, such as Molina in *Kiss of the Spider Woman*) characters at the center of their narratives. In his review of *The Flower of My Secret*, Guillermo Cabrera Infante brings together the names of Puig and Almodóvar for their careful crafting of their female protagonists: "There are authors, like Manuel Puig, who know women better than many men. . . . Almodóvar projects himself a lot, like Manuel used to do" (1). Puig's favoring of female characters can be found in his mingling with the women of his family at an early age:

The women's world fascinated me when I was a child: their dresses, their makeup, their afternoon strolls and especially the gossip. My mother was one of my favorite playmates. . . . I learned a lot from her and her friends, and my aunts provided me with a lot of data that I brought out in my books.  
(Almada Roche 153)

Whereas the "competition" between prominent male and female characters is stronger in Puig, only in Almodóvar's *Matador*, *Law of Desire*, *Tie Me Up! Tie Me Down!*, *Live Flesh* and *Talk to Her* (2002) are male characters protagonists of the story. For his frequent, early collaboration with "muse" Carmen Maura, Almodóvar can be compared to Italian modernist director Michelangelo Antonioni, who centered the action on female characters—often interpreted by Monica Vitti—and was referred to as "a women's director." Almodóvar has said, in this regard, that female characters as well as actresses have a wider range and are more "spectacular" (Cobos and Marías 100).

For its portrayal of stereotyped gender roles, its exploitation of emotionalism and sentimentality and its concern for sex and sexuality, melodrama is a source of inspiration for camp. The parody of melodrama is not a passive absorption of the signs of melodrama but a reading "against the grain" that ironically tints an idealistic, bourgeois representation of gender roles and sexuality with queer colorings. For

this reason, camp representation privileges ironic, sometimes shocking portrayals of sexuality, be it in the prolonged sex scenes of Almodóvar's *High Heels* or *Tie Me Up! Tie Me Down!*, for example, or in the ironically pathological masturbatory fantasies in Puig's *The Buenos Aires Affair* or in the state-mandated sex work of *Pubis Angelical*.

As critics have reiterated, the queer critique of camp has the ability to blur, to "cut across" borders of taste by revamping kitsch objects (Bourdieu 198), as well as to twist the significations of gender and sexuality: In *Tendencies* (1993), Sedgwick has pointed out how the root of the word "queer," the Indo-European *twerkw*, which yields words such as the Italian *torcere* (twist) as well as the German *quer* (transverse), means, in fact, "across" (xii). Puig's and Almodóvar's camp infuses the parody of melodrama with its own meanings, and aims at pointing out the inadequacies of the traditional gender system, whose inherent tensions remain unresolved in favor of a streamlining along the lines of heterosexual sexuality, thus excluding gay men, lesbians, transgendered, transvestites, cross-dressers and other queer sexualities.

Camp, "the signpost of contemporary popular culture of pre-Stonewall queerdom" (Cleto 1), has long exercised an enigmatic power over critics and camp followers, a power initially defined within the boundaries of the "aesthetically pleasing" and the "culturally superfluous," later inscribed within the academic domain of Queer studies, and developed on the basis of theoretical and historical frameworks of cultural analysis. While in the early part of this past century, camp was recognizable only to few ("Camp is in the eye of the beholder, especially if the beholder is camp" [Core 7]), in the later years, it has been identified as a discourse of resistance that is politically incorrect as well as prone to excess, as demonstrated by its "camping sites" (Booth 42) populated by diverse characters paired up in unorthodox and sometimes perverse coupling: Oscar Wilde with E. M. Forster and, by extension, with the directorial duo Merchant-Ivory; Mozart with David Bowie, Mick Jagger and Lou Reed; Maria Callas with Carmen Miranda; Caravaggio with Andy Warhol, and many more.

In this study I have contextualized the works of Manuel Puig and of Pedro Almodóvar within the redemptive aesthetics of camp with an eye to the underlying queer political agenda of gender critique, and I have explored these artists' choice of ironic reprise of the canons

of melodrama to carry out that agenda. Furthermore, the eclectic nature of their work, borrowing and mixing popular culture materials while maintaining a skeptical distance marked by the use of irony and self-reflexive techniques, is consistent with the postmodern re-evaluation of the so-called lowbrow forms of art and of entertainment. The cultural and historical milieu of postmodernism, aside from blurring the boundaries between "high" and "low" culture products, is also characterized by the tendency toward a weakening of absolute truths and values, which furthers the queer critique of sexual and gender roles.

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# Narrative of Surprising Conversions: Irv in New York

BY THOMAS WESTON FELS

*From 1969 to 1973 I lived on a farm commune in western Massachusetts. In 1979 and 1980, ten years after arriving at the farm and some six after having left, I set out to see what had become of my peers in alternative life, a project that continues to the present. A section of the resulting work, Farm Friends, Family Stories 1969–1999, in which we are introduced to my old farm friend Irv, is excerpted below.*

**W**hat surprised me from the start was that the best place to look for my friends from the farm was New York. Many of them had gravitated there. If they weren't permanently settled, they were comfortably camped; and if they had managed even more successfully to resist the magnetic forces of the city, they at least passed through it with some regularity.

As children of the sixties, my farm friends had seen themselves as different. When I knew them, they had been people who had not only given up but emphatically thrown away the chance to live the life of which New York was the acknowledged capital, choosing instead a life of quiet sanity, tucked away in the country, tending their much discussed gardens.

In 1969, when I moved to the farm, or even as late as 1973, when I left, it would have seemed unbelievable that 1979 would find a sizable portion of the farm's freedom-loving family, for whom simplicity, privacy, nature and independence were prized above any mate-

rial thing, in the world's greatest city, a crowded, class-ridden, antibiological, materialistic commercial center of the very first magnitude. But if this was a surprise, it was only the first of many.

I found Irv at a law office on the 26th floor of a building overlooking Broadway in the financial district. Below, the tall spire of Trinity Church was dwarfed by the giant edifices of business. Beyond the roofs of neighboring buildings, he pointed out Ellis Island, through which his grandparents had passed not such a long time before.

Irv had been a serious farmer, builder and mechanic, and it had been with some surprise that I had learned that he had later gone on to law school.

"We used to say that you should move to the country, and then find some way to make a living," he said in explanation; "but it seemed better to me to make some money and *then* move to the country."

The law offices were done in a French motif, vacuously tasteful decor that might have suited the State Department, or the fancy restaurant of Howard Johnson's dreams. The echoes of fashion and Versailles were remote. Leaving the office I reentered the world of the corridor, anonymous and public. The gold-shaded lights stopped with the carpet at the door.

Later I went to Irv's loft for dinner. I called, as instructed, from a corner phone in a dark commercial district in the 20s. Maggie, with whom he shared the place, came down and let me in. There was nothing as civilized as a buzzer.

The three of us had a late dinner and watched one of Irv's law professors on television; he and Irv were writing a book. We talked about the farm, about the Vermont town in which we had both lived for several years, about his early farming days in Pennsylvania. He recounted the story of the farm's great yellow cat's eating Susan's sandwich, made from the last food in the house, as she prepared for her first day of work—an omen of what farm life would be like. He described a midnight visit from our mutual friend Marshall shortly before his death by suicide, an attempt, he thought, to settle his debts.

"I just stood there cursing him," said Irv. "It was at my house at the inn—do you remember that?"

"'I'm just going to wait here till you're through,' Marshall had said, so I went right ahead," Irv continued, "and he did wait."

That's the two of them, unmistakable.

Late in the evening our friend Margaret showed up. She was in town for a voice lesson. When in the city, she stays with Irv. They settled in. Maggie shut her door with a suggestive bang. I decamped for the subway.

The next morning I met Irv at his office for lunch. Lines were long at his favorite yogurt and salad bars, so we grabbed shish kebab from a street vendor and ate as we walked. We studied the historic architecture of the Wall Street area, and compared the merits of various new buildings. Irv expounded on the symbolic statuary of the old Customs House, and pointed out the Downtown Athletic Club where he swims and works out. After lunch he called his office, but found he was not needed. He wasn't needed later in the afternoon, either, nor was he needed in the morning. When I considered the tidy sum he was being paid each day whether he was needed or not, I thought law school hadn't been such a bad idea.

At 2:30 Irv had to be up in the West Village with Bruce. Together with some others they were looking over a nine-story commercial property. Bruce needed space for his film business, Irv wanted a place to live, others simply wanted to invest. This was the first I had heard of Bruce in some time, so I went along.

Irv and I arrived first, then John, an architect and neighbor of Irv's whom he wanted to involve in the project. We were joined in short order by the building's superintendent and a representative of the owner. A minute later Bruce jumped out of an unmarked cab. A former drug dealer who had paid his debt with several years as an inmate in Attica, he wore his graying hair and beard neatly trimmed. His tweed sports coat and clean Levis bridged the gap between the formality of business and his independent personal style. Bruce and John were introduced and we went in.

Enthusiasm was high on the part of all involved, with the exception of the architect, who appeared dour and suspicious the entire time we were in the building, but it was Bruce who was the most obviously engaged. With an incredible though completely unself-conscious display of energy, he literally ran through the building. From top to bottom, from floor to floor, he disappeared around corners and into distant rooms long before anyone could catch up. He saw everything. He poked into bathrooms and closets, and when we got to the roof, he climbed to the top of the walls and peeked down on all four

sides. The result of this burst of energy was quick comprehension. Much of the building was currently unused. Unlike a set of apartments with their many tiny spaces, the rooms were mostly large, if not vast. It was not hard to get a good picture of the building as a whole: He liked it.

After looking at the cavernous ground floor with its thick pillars and giant bays where a huge tractor-trailer was being unloaded, we went up to the roof, then worked our way down again to the basement. The top floor was being used by a rehabilitation program. To get from the elevator to the roof we had to move through groups of timid, helpless, retarded adults who acted much like teenagers at a very dull party. Some were making and packing candles, but for the most part they were milling around, talking and holding hands. They presented a strange scene. I've rarely felt more out of place than I did moving through this throng of otherworldly people, under the gaze of their curious, unveiled eyes, with a group of well-heeled men who would probably take the floor right out from under them. No one asked us what we were doing; whatever it was, it was far beyond their control. We could as easily have represented the city, the government, the army or the Mob as the owners of the building.

The view from the roof was open to the north and west. The Hudson was visible nearby, the cityscape quite open. The building was relatively new, built early in the century, perhaps in the twenties or thirties. It was of yellow brick and of early modern design, reminiscent of Frank Lloyd Wright's Johnson's Wax tower. There were windows on three sides, with a good deal of light near the edges. The west was a blind, abutting wall; whatever had been there had been torn down to make room for the playground that now took up the rest of the block. We inspected the roof itself, on which we were walking, then the water tanks and sprinkler system that were housed there. Bruce was pleased, and said he'd heard that the sprinkler system was particularly good. Irv and John nodded in knowledgeable accord.

The seventh floor was a large, empty space, its old cedar paneling painted a dirty pinkish white. The scent of a perfume company lingered in the air, though there was nothing more than an old handbill to indicate that it had ever had any existence in the material realm. John continued to be skeptical. Bruce continued to run around. Irv pulled some papers from the inside pocket of his comically ill-fitting

suit and retired with John to a sunny window to discuss the building's balance sheet. The building was losing money, but, as Irv pointed out, it was only half rented.

In the basement we noted the ample electrical service and the six-inch gas main—a typical residential line is about one quarter of an inch. The building was evidently well kept. The boilers were beautiful and clean.

We split up to discuss matters in private. The real-estate man stayed with the superintendent; the rest of us went outside.

"What do you think?" Irv and Bruce asked John.

To everyone's surprise, John produced a set of drawings he had done for an earlier client. His whole act of doubtfulness had been a ploy. He was already familiar with the building. They discussed restoration, square footage, co-op, rental, building codes and historic districts. The architect who when in the building had found only fault allowed that it was actually worth twice the price that was being asked.

"Seriously," he said, "I know fifteen people who would like to buy this building, but where are you going to get the money?" They talked mortgages, refinancing and investment.

The money was no problem, said Bruce; he already had it. But he represented others—what would the return on investment be?

It was good. It looked, in fact, as if the building would be paying for itself in short order.

"It's not a bad buy," Irv said to me later, hopeful, as we headed for the Village for some coffee and a place to sit down and discuss what we had seen. "It's small, but it's very nice."

"What does it cost?" I asked.

"Two million," he said.

• • •

On Saturday I met Irv at Zabar's, on the West Side, a block or two from our friend Jesse's, where I had been visiting. It was packed. After a brief tour of the store, which Irv—who considers himself my teacher in the folkways of New York—thought essential, we piled into his battered old yellow station wagon and headed off to various errands.

Of all the people I met at the farm, Irv was among the most congenial and interesting. He was resilient and adaptable, qualities that were a tribute and not a threat to his character. He had few

preconceptions about himself and was a good and forgiving judge of others. It was impossible to fit Irv's ideas and experiences into some single and appropriate conception of the entire person that he was, and he seemed to accept this, even to like it. He was the willing embodiment of impossibility, an improbable figure, a walking enigma.

Irv was short and heavy. He usually wore dirty jeans and a gray sweatshirt, and was himself often of a gray cast either from fieldwork or from farm machinery. But this was only a guise, for issuing from his mouth, in a difficult to identify patois perhaps associated with his Long Island roots, laced with Ds for the more recognizable *th* (dis, dat), were learned and imaginative statements of a high order. Stopping work on the transmission of his truck to take a break, or perhaps just prompted by something he had to say, Irv would hold forth on politics, psychology, religion or history. His views were not only interesting but formidable. In his slow-moving way he would patiently explain some aspect of Marx or *The Brothers Karamazov*, a twinkle in his eye, as he shook a thick finger at you to emphasize the point.

It was from this disjunction of appearance and substance that Irv had originally gained notoriety. In the superficial world of the college to which we along with a number of others at the farm had gone, a freshman who quoted Bakunin, Kazantzakis and Jung from memory was enough to send most of the rushing chairmen packing. But Irv was not a bookworm. He was observant and thoughtful, and reading was only one of his interests. He was difficult to categorize, but that was part of his appeal.

Irv turned out to be a great deal more than a mere curiosity. As he became better known, he was sought out by others than the fraternity types who had assumed that he was destined for the offensive line of the football team. These were people who recognized his abilities, humor and depth and became his friends. It was through these later mutual friends that I heard of him.

These were peers from college, most of whom I have rarely seen again. But in the time I knew Irv he did make two friends of whom I saw a great deal. Irv is not one to go only halfway, and when he came under the influence first of Greg and then of Aaron, it set him on a track that carried him along for several years.

Greg was a friend of Irv's from the college. He was a restless, romantic figure, utterly self-sufficient and entirely without the need

to court the approval of others. He did what he wanted. He was tall, thin and good-looking; together, he and Irv were suddenly transmuted into Don Quixote and Sancho Panza.

Greg could be socially acceptable, and even socially adept when he chose to be, but that was rare. He was much more at home as a fun-loving joker, a devil's advocate. Beneath his controlled exterior time seemed to hang heavily on his hands. His alternating mannerliness and amusing unmannerliness appeared to be equally facetious acts of boredom, attempts to fend off a case of terminal ennui.

Like Irv, Greg was an anomaly at the college. He was a reformed delinquent, something his graceful style, when he turned it on, made hard to believe. He was also a confirmed farmer. He sometimes used the period between classes and exams to go home to Pennsylvania to plow or plant. On the wall of his room were large road signs from his hometown, mementos of his gang's final binge.

In recent years Greg's energy had developed along a more promising line. He traveled, and he paid for his trips by importing bric-a-brac that he then resold at great profit. His room was a storehouse of rattan furniture and tasteless carved idols.

Greg didn't go to the places everyone else did, distinguishing him from those around him. While others traveled to Paris and London, basking in the overexposed aura of Western culture, Greg traveled to Central America, Morocco and Arabia.

As a senior in high school Greg had won a Rotary scholarship. In what he later described as merely an attempt to get away from school, he had spent a year studying and traveling in the Philippines, speaking to Rotary clubs and learning the folkways of a foreign country. From then on he traveled whenever he could.

Irv accompanied Greg to Guatemala, and later on his own made trips to Central and South America. On one trip he got all the way to Tierra del Fuego. Irv's talk at the farm was constantly laced with stories of Guatemala, Cuzco and Lake Titicaca. He loved to dwell on the primitive methods of travel in South America, and we all wondered how he had gotten anywhere at all: an ancient train that caught fire as it crossed the Pampas; hitching through Argentine cattle country; looking down into a steep valley from a bus teetering through the Andes to see the skeletons of other wrecked buses below. He told stories of the colorful markets, he had snapshots of himself in a bar in

the cordillera that served only home-brewed liquor and developed the habit of keeping a macaw on his shoulder.

After college Greg taught school in Arabia. When he came back, he had money in his pocket. He returned to Pennsylvania and decided to try commercial-scale farming. Irv joined him. In previous years Greg's summer farming had been on rented land, so they rented a farm and equipment, collected some friends to help with the work and spent the summer growing vegetables, mostly corn, for their roadside stand.

They worked hard but had a good time, and didn't take themselves too seriously. When the summer was over they found that they had not made the great leap forward into commercial farming they had expected. With the money they had left they built and outfitted a tiny house on the back of a big old International flatbed truck, furnished it with, among other things, carpeting, a wood stove and two rocking chairs, painted it an unmistakable yellow and headed for Guatemala. Late in the fall they returned, and one morning we woke up to find them parked in our barnyard. The furniture filtered into the house and eventually became community property. The truck became our indispensable farm truck. The walls of the house became a hog pen. For the rest of my time at the farm, tasteless carved idols turned up unexpectedly in odd corners.

Irv stayed and Greg moved on. Once having arrived at the farm, Irv took things in hand, at least as much as that was possible there. He was a doer. In his time at the farm he built buildings, operated equipment and fixed it when necessary and occasionally stopped to read or travel. He considered himself our farming expert, and bought a tractor, a plow and a disk harrow to go with it. He wanted to continue to farm on a commercial scale, and heaped abundant scorn on backyard gardeners and back-to-the-land hippies. None of this went over very well with the others at the farm, who were both of those and decidedly noncommercial. Eventually, Irv felt his efforts to be thankless, and the rest of us unforesightful, and moved to a neighboring farm.

Irv found a companion in his high work standards and his recast intellectual life in Aaron, a local recluse. Aaron was no ordinary recluse (in the sixties no one was ordinary), or perhaps—all recluses sharing the oddness of their habits—he was. Fleeing graduate school

and a father who was a well-known scholar and teacher, he had taken to the woods with the vengeance his highly developed interests and skills obliged. He was building an exact replica of a Colonial house in a remote clearing in the woods, and doing it entirely by hand.

This was the kind of effort Irv could appreciate. While Irv was unwilling to abandon his tractor and truck and thoughts of large-scale farming simply to comply with Aaron's purism, Aaron's integrity and tenacity appealed to him; he felt he could learn from him. I think Irv could see that while by one standard Aaron was thinking small, by another he was thinking big; for while he was focusing his entire life on a single building, and that, notwithstanding his socialism, only for himself, it would be a gem.

Everything Aaron did he did well, and he did everything. He sawed down trees and milled them into boards. He hewed his own beams. He routed and planed his own paneling and windows in the Colonial style. He split his own shakes and laid up his own masonry. He even made his own nails. Aaron's insistence on perfection was so great that I once helped him replace one of the principal beams of the house, which he had hewn by hand himself, and was already notched into place, only because it had developed a slight bend.

Aaron was self-sufficient on a more challenging and total scale than we were at the farm, yet since his system was geared to him alone, it was more realistic in its demands on him, and he got much further with it toward meeting his particular needs. It was neater and worked better than our ill-defined subsistence, which tended to become merely antiestablishment and to have no more positive basis than our general disapproval of traditional middle-class American life.

Aaron made room for Irv in his work. Irv helped him tear down barns and houses for materials that Aaron sold, along with his own handmade beams and paneling, for decoration and restoration. He was well known, and his work was in great demand. Once in a while they would load up a truck and drive their handiwork down to Connecticut or Long Island, where the materials had been ordered by a contractor. They would remove slate from roofs and carefully store it. They cleaned old brick for reuse. They were particularly interested in beams and in siding, because it brought such a good price—even though a room paneled with old barn boards would have been totally anathema to Aaron. Old yellow pine floorboards, first-cut from the

New England virgin forest, pine such as we will never see again, went, naturally, to an old-yellow-pine-floorboard specialist. Aaron did things right. He and Irv were like a couple of squirrels storing nuts.

Aaron taught Irv how to use his tools and to appreciate some of the finer points of building by hand. Later, when Irv built himself a house at a neighboring farm, he used what Aaron had taught him. His tiny house had a slate roof, old windows and beams pegged in place. It was a beautiful house; it sat on the edge of a tiny clearing in the woods and was as enticing as the gingerbread house of *Hänsel and Gretel*. It was a bit more forgiving than Aaron's.

But the house came later. Between Irv's move to the farm and his move into his own house came another period of his life when he left the farm and lived closer to Aaron. He had decided to go back to college and, needing to be alone to study, thought that this would be a good time to sample for himself the life of the recluse. He moved into a rambling old inn about a mile from Aaron's. Like Aaron's house, the inn was situated on a seldom used dirt road. It sat in a forest woven with a loose fabric of stone walls—evidence of the fields and pastures recently reclaimed by nature from the early settlers—in a town that had long ceased to have either a town center or a government, and a settlement that probably had not appeared on a map for more than a century.

Visiting Irv's house was like walking into one of the culture's abandoned rooms, one that had been boarded up for years. The forest was a thin haze of new hardwoods, tall, delicate and evenly spread. They were so straight, thin and even that they looked less like a forest than a heavy rain. The fields were still there among them: Nature had as yet woven only a gossamer present over the settlers' hard-earned past. There was still a sense of balance, as if either side could win.

I visited one day in January but found that Irv was at the college. There was an immense log in the stove that indicated that he planned to be out most of the day. Having gone to the trouble of getting there, I decided to settle in for a while. There was always the chance that he might return. I took my time writing a note, looked at some of his books and tried to take in the place.

He lived in one corner of the old inn. The inn was a long and vast building that had aged gracefully, but that in its simple and social elegance seemed to resent the unruly presence of the woods steadily

encroaching on it from all sides. The woods seemed a threat, the sign of its certain doom. Forests, after all, continue to grow, while buildings, even the most solid, have only a half-life: From the moment of their completion, they begin to decay. The inn was still inhabited. Besides Irv, far at the other end of the building, lived another friend of Aaron's, but the empty rooms between were more than double the space the two of them had put together.

Irv had an upstairs suite warmed by a benevolent Ashley stove. His many windows looked out into the surrounding woods. There were no other houses or cars for miles. There was snow on the ground and in the air; it was very quiet.

Stepping into Irv's house that day was like stepping out of time. Like many an old house, it had ceased to have a specific period; it just seemed old, and in seeming out of our time seemed, really, out of time altogether. Certain old houses no longer announce themselves as having been built in some particular century, or for some particular purpose; they read generically as human structures, as proportion, light and materials. Irv's house and rooms seemed to have outlived temporality, and I thought perhaps Irv had, too. A few well-chosen books, basic clothes and supplies, a bit of food—looking at Irv's rooms, I thought he was after all a good recluse: He had pared life down to its essentials and had only succeeded in making it look better. On the way home I watched a flock of wild turkeys grazing in the woods.

After the inn there was the period in which Irv contributed most heavily to the life of the farm. He helped design and build, besides his own house, a three-story workshop, and continued to farm and market crops, as well as to keep up the hundred other endless tasks of farm life. He soon tired of our nagging democracy, which, in good Greek tradition, leveled the outspoken as it quietly absorbed their ideas. Irv put out feelers and came up with a new idea, workable and bankable. He enlisted the fortune of his friends Oates, a lawyer, and David, a dealer in what we now call controlled substances, the ability of Greg, the farmer, and the interest and support of a prominent leader of the organic gardening movement, and bought a large farm in up-state New York to demonstrate the feasibility of organic farming on a commercial scale. This venture lasted several years, and certainly could have succeeded longer had its founders not moved on to other things.

Finally, perhaps under the influence of Oates, a Brahmin drop-out who practiced law in his native Cambridge, Irv had a last card up his sleeve. Nine years out of college, with a résumé that must have read like *Huckleberry Finn*, he graduated from Harvard Law School. Farmer turned lawyer, he spent his first summer out of law school writing the constitution of a developing nation. When I tried to reach him at his office, I got one of his superiors.

"Ah, you want my friend Irv," she said wistfully, and I knew he hadn't changed.

• • •

Back at home in New York we enter again the commercial building on 20th Street that houses Irv's loft. Getting in requires four keys, one for the front door, one for the elevator and two for the apartment.

"Isn't that sick?" he says, looking at his key ring with perhaps 15 or 20 keys on it. "I tried to get rid of some of these, but I realized that I used them all."

The door opens on his large top-floor space. The loft is New York's answer to the rambling spaces we had in the country. There are a dining and a living area, a bedroom and study housing his large collection of books and a curtained-off area in a corner that serves as a guest room. Even with all of this, there is a lot of open space; one barely notices the Ping-Pong table. The place is comfortable, though without apparent style or the intent to express anything in particular. A macaw flutters among the pipes on the ceiling and occasionally swoops down to light on a sofa, chair or picture frame. Small change is scattered about: dimes and quarters apparently not worth picking up. On the table, among other papers, is the wrapper from \$100 worth of new bills marked with the stamp of Irv's bank. A baggage claim from Denver indicates that David is in town. In the clutter are some fairly large bills. There are two 20s in the dope box, which appears to be much used. The accoutrements of domestic cocaine use lie nearby. Later, Irv finds another 20, tightly rolled, gathering dust under the coffee table, and chuckles at the irony of losing money through sheer carelessness and neglect.

Irv loses no time in getting a long stick and poking the macaw out of the ceiling. Five or ten minutes are spent coaxing and chasing the bird from beneath chairs and atop tilting picture frames in a playful yet intent effort at domestication and mutual understanding.

"Come on, Sal . . . here you go, here you go. . . . Goddamn it, come here! Pretty smart, isn't he? . . . Over here . . . that's it. . . . No, no, no!" The effort reaches its long-sought-for climax when the bird sits on his shoulder.

This is a serious and regular business between them, and means a lot to Irv.

"He's only done it a couple of times," he says proudly. They talk.

"Hello. Hello. Hello."

"Quack!"

Pure delight.

After the ritual of Sal's daily training, Irv turns to the other important aspects of his daily life: dope, cocaine and rock 'n' roll. We turn on his stereo, indulge our bad habits and then go out again.

I soon tire of shopping with his friend Jan and her grandmother, especially since, being the only one without errands, I am often selected for guard duty and spend a good deal of time sitting nervously in an illegally parked car.

When we drove past Laura's, a painter from the farm family, I bowed out. I called her from a nearby phone and dropped by for a visit. We went out to dinner at an artists' bar near her apartment, across from the American Thread Building, where I had once worked with the publisher and writer Paul Williams to try to get a new magazine off the ground. It didn't. At the artists' bar, paintings by someone Laura reminded me had been a farm visitor hung on the wall. She clearly appreciated the bohemian ambience.

We talked about our lives in the years since we had last seen each other. Laura seemed happy and more articulate than I remembered. Perhaps this had something to do with Werner Erhard's est program, of which she was a satisfied product. Laura talked about the life of women at the farm, the freedom of relationships, with its inherent loosening of the bonds of responsibility, and freedom of dress: the easily created dream world of secondhand clothing. She felt Margaret was the most obvious of this group. Margaret's room had literally been filled with racks of secondhand dresses. We spoke of women's dependence on men at the farm. Since going there in 1970 she had always had a male in her life to do things. Later, she had been glad to be off on her own in Paris, after breaking up with an old friend of mine, though even there she said she could have "married a count

and been set up for life." She valiantly resisted. Instead, she and her sister, who are independently wealthy, set up housekeeping in New York. Laura supports her artwork by setting up museum exhibitions. Her sister, a curator, is planning to adopt a child.

After seeing Laura I returned with Irv to the loft, and we settled in for a long evening. He had invited over his officemate Chris and his girlfriend. They arrived and we proceeded with the business of the evening: dope, cocaine and rock 'n' roll. Chris was half dead with a heavy cold, but we managed, mostly on Irv's indomitable high energy, to go through till four A.M.

Chris's girl was, however, very much alive.

"I was tempted to jump her myself," Irv said later.

I could see that this was a distinct possibility. I played Ping-Pong with Chris; he was so tense he could barely hold the paddle.

"A Vietnam vet," Irv had said to me in preparation for the evening: "crazy."

As well as Ping-Pong there were forays into darts and even talk of a visit to an after-hours club that didn't open till five. Irv had a great time. He was eager for company. He gloriéd in the spaciousness of the night's activities, pointed constantly to the energizing effects of the coke and announced each song on the long tape he had made as "a classic."

"Isn't it great?" he shouted later over the music. "Corporate America is paying for this lifestyle!"

Certainly Irv's style of life is a personal victory; about the rest of it I'm not so sure. I can't quite figure out what connection Irv's life bears to corporate America. It does support him, yet he is utterly disdainful of other lawyers, especially young ones, and their habit of putting their work ahead of their personal lives. He pits himself against them—rather effortlessly and indirectly, more by noncooperation than by anything more active—and against his office, which he refers to with a series of four-letter words strung together to replace the long enumeration of Germanic names; yet at times he savors the connection he has to them and to that world.

The difference is, I think, that he has a different kind of life and career in mind. He too often puts work first, but he works largely for himself and his friends, while the others are content to let someone else structure their lives.

"I'm the most competent person I know in the city," Irv had said to me unself-consciously as we cruised along, moving uptown, in his old station wagon, the Yellow Blimp. And it is true. The farm people are in charge of their own lives, and sometimes those of others as well. If they do work for others, it is usually on their own terms; they get a reasonable return for their effort. They know how to be effective. In contrast, other New Yorkers seem to enjoy paying for services, for having things done for them. Whatever good excuses they may have for this, it's a different kind of life. I often found Irv ferrying people around in his car as he had done for Jan (a rare service in the city), moving things for them and in other ways manipulating the environment in a manner uncharacteristic of the city's upper middle class. This difference in approach makes New York a natural sort of frontier for farm people. It is an endless absorber of their energies. There is a great deal to do in the city, and money and progress to be made at a relatively low cost, if one is willing to work and to take a different approach.

On top of this, though, Irv's own personal style adds a distinct touch.

"Know what Steve Kohn's doing?" he asks, referring to a mutual college friend, as he bumps his way out of a parking space. The Blimp is invincible, and also expendable, and someone has made the mistake of double parking over it.

"I don't care," says Irv with a dismissive wave of the hand at the other car, as he neatly pulls his dented hulk out into the street with a scraping sound. The double-parked car, shiny and new, shudders perceptibly. "It's his own fault," he says, and shakes a pudgy, scholarly, moralistic finger at my qualms.

"He's an assistant Secretary of State," he continues, "and when he's done with that, he has a job teaching law at Georgetown." I register these changes.

Chris and friend leave around four. The subject of the after-hours bar is dropped. Irv rounds out the evening by reading to me from Hegel's *Phenomenology of Mind*.

"Let's see, here it is, the 'black cows' section. Listen to this: 'Beauty, powerless and helpless, hates understanding, because the latter exacts from it what it cannot perform.' Some people think this is really *it*, that this is where philosophy is at—particularly the preface. 'The

truth is thus the bacchanalian revel," he continues, "'when not a member is sober . . .'" and onward into the night.

• • •

Sunday morning we slept late. We delivered Irv's stereo speakers to Jan, who was borrowing them for a party later in the day, and had brunch at the Kiev, at Second Avenue and Seventh Street, a favorite of Irv's. Over the meal Irv discussed real estate with the man across the table, a complete stranger, and mentioned to me that Timothy Leary had been spending time with Bruce.

In the afternoon we returned to Jan's. This was the heart of the country: a tree-trimming party consisting entirely of attorneys, with a few friends, lovers and children unavoidably sprinkled in. Eggnog, cookies, cocktails, trivia. A young man held forth on the presidential candidates, conveying mostly a great feeling of his own importance. Another introduced himself to me as someone who sold vacuum cleaners.

"Not door-to-door, you know," he said, thinking I might have misunderstood, "nationally, internationally—marketing."

"I don't like the country," he explained to me very earnestly when he heard I was from Vermont. "For me the country is a Holiday Inn somewhere." He was quite serious.

Jan's apartment was an extremely comfortable but understated floor in a restored brownstone in Kipp's Bay, in the lower 30s. There was a fireplace, brick walls and a roof garden. The brick gave it a warm tone, the fire made it almost homey. The view from the roof in the brown, foggy evening was breathtaking. The city looked like some lost canyon of Eliot Porter. I've rarely felt so much in the city, so much a part of it. At roof height there were no streets with which to orient oneself, just rectangular forms of differing heights, as if suspended. The evening lights shone warmly in the fog.

Jan has a distinct interest in older men, but there were none at the party, perhaps due to the presence of her grandmother, with whom she seemed quite close, and of whom she was extremely solicitous. Jan's life seems strangely divided. Her apartment was more a part of her public life: presentable, neutral, passionless. The passionate side of her life, strong in Irv's knowledgeable assessment, was invisible. Jan is wispy, thin, pale, wiry. She has a staying sort of energy rather than the assertive, muscular sort. I imagine she can bend iron when she tries—unhurriedly.

"Jan's going to be unhappy," says Irv, and continues elsewhere his search for the perfect mate.

Conversation at the party ran almost entirely to their shared profession. Most worked long hours and awkward schedules. It sounded like a contest to see whose were worst. Most worked on weekends at least some of the time, but as Irv pointed out, they like to. They are climbers, and that is the way to the top—one way.

"The slow way," said Irv.

They really did seem one-dimensional.

"I like to shock them," said Irv. "In Cambridge, when we were studying for exams, and we would come across a hard problem, I would say something like, 'Yeah, that's difficult. It's like trying to get all that hair out of your teeth after making love.' Or I'll wear my necklace to work—you know, the one made of shells. I'll go into a meeting, and one of those old farts will make some comment about it; but when I tell him it's a present from the president of the Marshall Islands, that shuts him up."

The attorneys seemed to work hard and without imagination. The same was true of their leisure. Being overworked, they wanted to do nothing the rest of the time, which is just what they seemed to be doing. Suddenly great expanses of golf course took on new meaning.

We waited out the party, unhooked the speakers and went back downtown. At home again, Irv lectured me on the Spanish Civil War, "the greatest moment for the left in this century." We had a late dinner consisting entirely of parboiled, pan-fried cauliflower. Walking his fingers through an old atlas, he described some of his travels, from the Sudan to Patagonia. The train on the Pampas; dinner with a road crew in Argentina. At dark they simply took a lamb from a nearby field and roasted it whole on a spit over an open fire.

I commented on the difference in our present situation.

"Most of what I know," he said, "doesn't come from books."

# Race Relations as End Game

*The Emperor of Ocean Park* by Stephen L. Carter  
New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2002

BY MEERA TAMAYA

Although chosen as *Today Show* Pick by John Grisham, it would be reductive to characterize Stephen Carter's expansive novel (653 pages) merely as a blockbuster mystery in the Grisham mode. Carter, the William Nelson Cromwell Professor of Law at Yale University since 1982, has written nonfiction books, such as *The Culture of Disbelief and Civility*. His legal expertise and involvement in cultural and racial issues make *The Emperor of Ocean Park* more than a mystery novel; rather, it is a seamless blend of mystery, satire and roman à clef, in which a chess problem provides the metaphoric underpinning for the overt and covert antagonism between what Carter terms the darker and paler nations making up the United States of America.

The protagonist Talbot Garland, called Misha by family and friends, a professor of law at a prestigious university in the fictitious city of Elm Harbor (suspiciously like New Haven), receives two momentous phone calls on the same day: His wife, Kimmer, calls to say that she is one of the finalists for the federal court of appeals, while another phone call lets him know that his father, a judge, has just died. It is

hard to say which weighs more heavily on Misha—his relationship with his brilliant and vivacious wife of nine years, whom he suspects of having a lover, or his troubled relationship with his father, a rabid right-wing judge whose own nomination to the Supreme Court was derailed by the unsolved mystery of an adored daughter's death in a hit-and-run accident, which precipitates the judge's decline into bitter resentment and alcoholism.

In his will, the judge has bequeathed Misha the charming house in Ocean Park in the town of Oak Bluffs on Martha's Vineyard, in which middle-class blacks have summered for decades. In the conservative judge's "often-repeated view, the Vineyard had tumbled down-hill, for it was crowded and noisy and besides, they let everyone in now, by which he meant black people less noisy, well off than us" (3).

The author skewers the pretentiousness of the elite, black and white alike, which not surprisingly turns out to be similar, if not identical. The satire is intermixed with the pathos of family relationships gone awry, thanks largely to the judge's own dubious dealings and his insistence on emotional frigidity, which he thinks is the hallmark of the upper class. Misha, a practicing evangelical Christian who is not embarrassed about seeking out his pastor for counseling during his domestic and professional crises, is as fervently left wing as his father is far to the right. Misha's relationships with his brother and sister are believably complex and moving, and Carter's deftness in evoking character recalls cozy British mysteries; however, the spectacular resolution, involving a hurricane and a shoot-out on Martha's Vineyard, is firmly in the American hard-boiled tradition.

The chess problem, which leads Misha to the solution of the mystery, is esoteric in the extreme, making it hard for me, a chess addict myself, to follow beyond the obvious metaphoric resonance. For example, the epigraph to Part I of the novel is titled "Nowotny Interference," with the following explanation: "Nowotny interference—in the composition of chess problems, a theme in which the Black pieces obstruct one another's ability to protect vital squares." The novel's dedication, "for Mom, who loved a mystery, and for Dad, who is not in this one: I love you both, always," cleverly makes it clear even before the final author's note, with its customary disclaimer of any basis in real life, that the judge, who bears more than a passing resemblance to Clarence Thomas, the highly contested conservative

nominee for the Supreme Court, whose eventual success depended on the sponsorship of his white friends and the denial of his own roots, is not based on his own father.

In spite of the author's lengthy disclaimer, it is hard to avoid the gossipy parlor game of treating this mystery as a roman à clef. But the plot is too convoluted, the carefully nuanced cast of characters too huge, to make convincing connections to real life. That the protagonist bears a close resemblance to the author professionally, politically and religiously is undeniable, all of which makes the book a literate page-turner. My only caveat is that toward the end, the author's narrative technique is too predictable, and gives off more than a whiff of writing by numbers—every chapter begins with a reluctant witness being traced with great difficulty, and ends with dropping too many misleading clues, among which is an infinitesimal grain of what may or may not be the truth. But for a first novel, this is a very, very minor flaw, especially given the subtlety of characterization and the intricacy of plot. I hope Carter will write more mystery novels; I, for one, shall certainly devour them.

## Book Review

# A Brainy Prole Among Dim Aristos

*The Gatekeeper: A Memoir* by Terry Eagleton  
St. Martin's Press, 2001

BY MEERA TAMAYA

Terry Eagleton, the prolific Marxist critic, is best known for his lucid and witty *Introduction to Literary Theory* (1983), which is a book to savor over and over again, not only for its incisive summary of the varieties of jargon-laden literary theories—mostly emanating from France and eagerly embraced by American tenured academics in elite institutions—but for Eagleton's irreverent humor, which refuses to take anything, except social revolution and justice for all, seriously.

Besides scores of books on Marxist theory and its applications, Eagleton has also written a novel, *Saints and Scholars*, several plays and a screenplay for Derek Jarman's film *Wittgenstein*. He recently resigned from his position as Thomas Wharton Professor of English at Oxford, to accept the position of Professor of Cultural Theory at Manchester University. Since his writing, always passionate, always witty, is often directed at literary criticism, the news that he has written a memoir came as a surprise. Of course, Terry Eagleton being what he is—that is, professionally addicted to turning received wisdom on its head—his memoir is not the usual exhibitionist tell-all of family and personal neurosis and gripes. Instead of a chronological narrative of his life, the book is divided into thematic chapters, titled

with characteristic insouciance "Lifers," "Catholics," "Thinkers," "Politicos," "Losers," "Dons" and "Aristos.

The opening chapter is a satirical yet deeply empathetic portrayal of nuns at a Carmelite convent at which as a ten-year-old altar boy Eagleton served as a gatekeeper who had the job of closing the gate on novices who took the veil and disappeared from the secular world for good. The description of the convent suggests incarceration for all "lifers," voluntary or involuntary: "It was set among walls, spiked with shards of glass, forbidding enough to repel voyeurs, religious obsessiveness, nun-stalkers, sex offenders, militant Protestants, enraged atheists. But walls were also there to keep the occupants in" (5). The paradoxical theme of keeping out and keeping in enables Eagleton to engage in his characteristic riffs. The nuns "could pull a fast one on death by acting it out in their lives, performing their own demise and thus cheating it of its terrors. By being in but not of the world their existence was a kind of irony but in courting one form of irony they needed to avoid another" (18).

Born in 1945, raised in industrial working-class Salford in a "world which would no more have understood how you could make a living by writing books than how you could make one by picking wax from your ears" (51), Eagleton was a sickly child given to life-threatening bouts of asthma, which forced him to stay in bed and read voraciously to pass the time. His first move away from the grimly inarticulate impoverishment of the Irish slum was to grammar school, and then on to Cambridge by the sheer strength of his intellectual brilliance. In the middle of his entrance exam to Cambridge, one of the dons, Dr. Greenway, who later became his supervisor, comes in to tell Eagleton that his father who "never broke his silence . . . did not touch us or play with us; nothing in his own impoverished upbringing had taught him how" (22) had died. Eagleton was admitted to Cambridge anyway: "I stumbled through Cambridge sick at heart. It was as though I had murdered to get in" (124).

Lonely and isolated among the tall, arrogant, aristocratic fellow students who "brayed rather than spoke," the undersized Eagleton was further alienated by Dr. Greenway (not his real name), a blue-blooded Tory whom he skewers as follows:

It was my first glimmering of differences between erudition and intelligence, which I had always imagined went together.

Greenway was certainly intelligent, but he had no more ideas in his head than a hamster. Indeed, he was not only bereft of ideas but passionately opposed to them, which struck me as a little odd for a doctor of philosophy. He did not see the need for them, any more than he saw the need for wrapping his feet in asbestos or wearing a tutu. I soon discovered that his role as a teacher was to relieve me of my ideas, as the role of a burglar is to rifle your bedroom. (128)

While a committed radical far-left activist, Eagleton, however, was obliged by his honesty to lampoon the left as mercilessly as he does the aristocrats, the dons and other right-wingers. He describes the far-left organization of which he was a member as follows:

The outfit's attitude to the proletariat was rather like that of the Virgin Mary to the baby Jesus, reverently acknowledging his divinity but harboring no illusions after cleaning up his shit. . . Almost all its members were teachers, students, social workers, eccentric upper-class renegades, social workers, socially autistic types searching forlornly for human contact, or closet psychopaths eagerly anticipating a spot of revolutionary violence; but dialectically speaking they were doughty dockers and brawny boilermakers to a man. The general idea was that even when they were wrong they were right, a doctrine which a traditional Roman Catholic would have no trouble in grasping. (78-79)

It comes as no surprise to learn that Walter Benjamin, Oscar Wilde and Ludwig Wittgenstein are Eagleton's heroes. Eagleton is presumably a lapsed Catholic, and one cannot quite escape the suspicion that his stylistic nimbleness, while always a source of intense pleasure (I try to read everything by him), also enables him to get away with fine-spun casuistry and have it both ways: to damn and to praise with surgical precision, all in the same lucid-seeming, irony-packed sentence worthy of a verbal contortionist. You find yourself smiling and agreeing with what he says, then at the end, asking yourself, wait a minute, how did he get from there to here, from total negation to affirmation or vice versa? Is style all, as Oscar Wilde would have it? Perhaps it is. And why not? In this grim world, batted about by forces we cannot control, personal style is a small triumph. And literary style, because of the enduring pleasure it affords, is no small victory over the odds.

## Contributors

**Thomas Weston Fels** is an independent curator and writer specializing in American culture, photography and art. His most recent exhibition, "Fire and Ice: Treasures from the Photograph Collection of Frederic Church at Olana," was shown at the Dahesh Museum in New York and the Van Gogh Museum in Amsterdam. Its companion volume has been nominated for the Alfred H. Barr, Jr., Award of the College Art Association, the Philip Johnson Award of the Society of Architectural Historians and the Wittenborn Memorial Book Award of the Art Library Society of North America. He currently serves as curator of the new Elizabeth de C. Wilson Museum at the Southern Vermont Arts Center in Manchester, Vermont.

**Karen Pepper** teaches composition in the English/Communications Department at Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts. She has delivered papers at several professional conferences and writes poetry as well as academic prose.

**Graziana Ramsden** teaches modern languages at Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts. She is a Fulbright scholar and recipient of the Erasmus Scholarship at the Universitat Autonoma de Barcelona, Spain. She has traveled widely and presented several papers at foreign-language conferences in the United States.

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